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Philadelphia? Probably. New Jersey? Maybe. Columbus? No way. Turns out, however, that everyone was wrong. It was a signing that shocked the hockey world. So how exactly did 'Johnny Hockey' end up in a Blue Jackets uniform? In the end, a little homework went a very long way. **BY JARED CLINTON**

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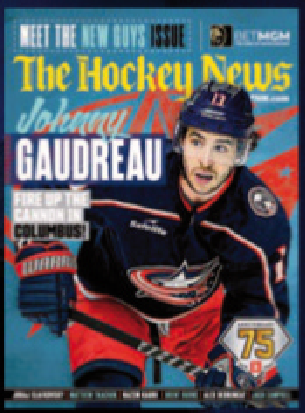
Nationwide Arena
Nationwide Arena

BEN JACKSON/COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

ON THE COVER



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MORE THAN (JOHNNY) HOCKEY

STEVEN ELLIS/THE HOCKEY NEWS

WITH ALL APOLOGIES TO Nazem Kadri, Darcy Kuemper and all of the other NHL stars who took their talents elsewhere in free agency, the signing of the summer goes to the Columbus Blue Jackets for snagging Johnny Gaudreau and creating a seismic wave in the hockey world. If you hadn't noticed, attracting free agents to central Ohio hasn't been easy for the organization in the past. But Gaudreau, who received Hart Trophy consideration last season, wanted to come to Columbus.

We're all looking forward to what's to come on the ice. The idea of playmaking 'Johnny Hockey' teaming up with deadly sniper Patrik Laine is a thrilling one. But it's off the ice where the Blue Jackets also had to have a strong case for Gaudreau – the subject of our cover story (starting on pg. 32).

One of the city's biggest hockey boosters is Cam Atkinson, now playing for the Philadelphia Flyers. Atkinson spoke to Gaudreau throughout the free-agency process, and he laid out the case for Columbus for us media folk at the NHL/NHLPA Player Media Tour in Las Vegas. The talented right winger spent a decade in Columbus, and it's where both of his sons were born. "There's a reason why a lot of players retire there and live there full time," Atkinson said. "I just explained to him that you only travel eight minutes to get downtown, 15 minutes to the airport, everything is at your disposal in 15-20 minutes, tops. You have the zoo. You have five of the top 60 golf courses in the country. People don't know what Columbus is all about unless you've been there."

I've actually been to Columbus many times, and not just for the Blue Jackets. Back in my Young Man Days, my friends and I would make the pilgrimage to Columbus every summer for the punk-rock More Than Music Festival. From lounging on the Ohio State grass across from the Newport Music Hall to hanging out in the state fairground parking lot, I always had fun in town (and if memory serves, I think I even saw the construction of Nationwide Arena).

Now, I was sleeping on people's couches in punk houses near Ohio State (or one year, under a fax machine at the office of a friend's dad), so I can't much speak to the beauty of Columbus' nicer neighborhoods, but Gaudreau ended up buying his new place from erstwhile Blue Jacket Oliver Bjorkstrand, who was dealt to Seattle in order to clear up cap space.

What I do know is that this is a game-changer for an organization that has never had a 100-point scorer in its lineup – and I'm not alone in that thinking. As soon as the Gaudreau signing was announced, the city sprang into action. The Jackets told me they were on pace to sell the most new season tickets they had at any time in the past 10 years. Toss in the diehard faithful who have supported the team through thick and thin and you've got a whole new level of excitement coming to the rink. Overall, the Jackets expected to crest 11,000 season tickets this year, which would put them back to pre-pandemic levels.

I've heard the cannon roar at Nationwide Arena, and I've witnessed the sheer force of the crowd therein. The Blue Jackets still play in a difficult Metropolitan Division, and nothing in life is guaranteed, but with Gaudreau leading an offense that also features Laine, promising rookies Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko, and with defenseman Zach Werenski helping out from the back, there are plenty of reasons to be excited about Columbus this season and beyond.

Ryan Kennedy
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PHOTO BY MICHELLE VALBERG

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Meet The New Teammates

THIS ISSUE OF THE Hockey News focuses on the "new guy" on each NHL team who will hopefully make a difference in the team's pursuit of the Stanley Cup. Here at The Hockey News, we are always looking to add new teammates to the roster to make a positive difference and experience for our readers, and, once again, we have.

Oct. 1, 2022 is The Hockey News' 75th anniversary, and during the first 75 years, we have had hundreds of corporate teammates along this journey, all of whom have, in their own way, added to the overall experience for our readers. This time, we have reached further down into the grassroots of the game in traditionally smaller markets than those of the NHL and throughout Canada and the U.S.

As we begin the next 75 years, I want to take a moment to give a shoutout to our two newest corporate teammates who are supporting this, the iconic magazine we all love.

The Hockey News has entered into agreements with both the AHL (theahl.com) and ECHL (echl.com) starting with the 2022-23 season. The Hockey News will provide more coverage of each of these leagues for you, the reader, to be able to take a deeper dive into what is going on in each of these two leagues. Yes, I know that we have already been covering these two leagues for many decades, but this new partnership will deliver more content, which all of you devour as quickly as we deliver it to you on all of our platforms.

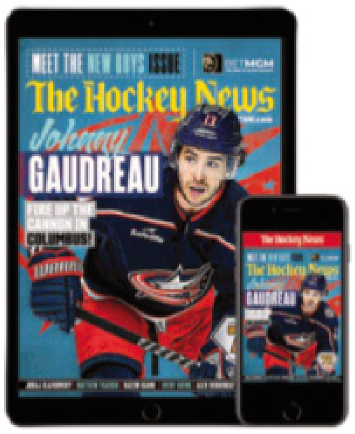
With the AHL being the primary development league for the NHL and the ECHL being the primary development league for the AHL, you are likely to see the majority of future stars of the NHL on the way up the development ladders in the AHL and ECHL.

In addition, the social-media teams at each of the two leagues' teams will work with The Hockey News' social-media team to ensure that all of the many millions of hockey fans of the AHL and ECHL are introduced to the millions of hockey fans on The Hockey News' social-media platforms.

Working with commissioner Scott Howson of the AHL and commissioner Ryan Crelin of the ECHL, their respective partnerships with The Hockey News will ensure that the hockey-content ecosystem, which contains millions of hockey-crazed people like me, will have many millions of more interactions with fellow fans of the game.

I encourage all of you to keep an eye out on our social media and in our print and digital offerings for news on the AHL and ECHL during the season, and along with your favorite NHL team, you should select your favorite AHL and ECHL team and follow them as well.

To the many thousands of existing subscribers of The Hockey News who already follow their favorite AHL and ECHL teams, as well as all our subscribers collectively, I want to thank you for your continued support. H



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17 PUCK CULTURE: SIX INSPIRATIONS FOR MIGHTY DUCKS CHARACTERS

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NHL

‘SLOW, THEN FAST’

After a busy 2022 – where six women took on NHL assistant GM jobs – it’s now only a matter of time before someone takes the next step **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

ON JULY 7, THE Bell Centre was buzzing. The hometown Montreal Canadiens had just sent shockwaves through the building by selecting Slovakian left winger Juraj Slafkovsky first overall in the 2022 draft.

The New Jersey Devils owned the second selection and had a surprise of their own in store. Just one day after she became the fifth woman in six months to be named an NHL assistant GM, 29-year-old Kate Madigan led her club’s 14-person contingent onstage. She shook hands with commissioner Gary Bettman, then stood aside as Montreal native and current Devils executive vice-president of hockey operations Martin Brodeur greeted the crowd to enthusiastic cheers. “When they started clapping for him, I was like ‘OK, they like us’ ” Madigan said.

Just hours earlier, GM Tom Fitzgerald had asked her to make the Devils’ pick. “(Brodeur’s) like, ‘Are you ready?’ and I’m, like, ‘No, but go ahead.’ ”

Madigan stepped up to the microphone. Then, in French and English, she announced New Jersey’s selection of defenseman Simon Nemec. “I hate public speaking,” she said. “I’m getting on live TV, which I’ve never done, in front of thousands of fans, and to do it in a different language. I actually do speak French. I was fluent when I was younger, I did an immersion program. But just getting in front of people like

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READY OR NOT
Madigan was understandably nervous about stepping up on the grand stage but managed well – in two languages.

PHOTO BY VANCOUVER CANUCKS

that, I was like 'Fitzy, I'm not even going to remember my name up there.' "

Fitzgerald could have made the pick himself. July's event in Montreal marked the NHL's first in-person draft since Fitzgerald was named New Jersey's interim GM in January 2020, then had that tag removed six months later. When Fitzgerald's oldest son, Ryan – a member of the AHL's Lehigh Valley Phantoms – suggested Madigan make the pick, Fitzgerald ran with the idea. "I went to my president and CEO, and my owner was there," Fitzgerald said. "I told them before I dropped it on her. I said, 'I don't want to make you nervous, but I think this would be dropping the mic on stage.' And she was nervous. But yeah, I got the green light from everybody."

The decision speaks volumes about how highly regarded Madigan has become by the Devils since then-GM Ray Shero brought her in to assist in the amateur scouting department in 2017. Over the past two-and-a-half years, Fitzgerald says he has come to treat her as his "chief of staff."

"She did everything," Fitzgerald said. "She helped me with my vision, my blueprint of where I want the organization to go. She was so organized. My first trade deadline: 'OK, these are the teams who want Blake Coleman, and these are all their draft picks.' It was all laid out in a deck form. 'Oh my god, this is so clear.' She touched everything. She touched ownership. She touched upper management. She touched the pro scouts, the amateur scouts. The coaches, the equipment managers, going through scouting manuals. Anything hockey operations, she touched."

Madigan came to the Devils with a master's degree in accounting. She didn't play hockey but did grow up around the game. Her father, Jim Madigan, had spent 18 years as a scout with the New York Islanders and Pittsburgh Penguins before becoming coach of Northeastern University's men's hockey program from 2011 to 2021.

That's a departure from the majority of the other five women who have assumed assistant GM roles in 2022. Cammi Granato of the Vancouver Canucks and Hayley Wickenheiser of the Toronto Maple Leafs are both Olympic gold medallists who served as captains of their respective national teams. Meghan Hunter of the Chicago Blackhawks was a star at the University of Wisconsin. And Emilie Castonguay, who kicked off the hiring trend in January, skated at Niagara University before earning a law degree, then becoming the first female NHLPA-certified player agent in Canada. Alexandra Mandrycky, who Seattle promoted in September, comes from an analytics background. (See pg. 12 sidebar.)

CAMMI
GRANATO

Castonguay and Granato were outside hires who joined a Canucks organization in transition. When new president of hockey operations Jim Rutherford took the reins in Vancouver last December, he made it clear from the outset he wanted to hire a diverse staff. "I think it's reflective of a larger societal push in business and other sports as well," said Meghan Chayka, co-founder of analytics firm Stathletes. Chayka has now been working in hockey for more than a decade.

More female coaches are being hired in both men's and women's sports, and Kim Ng became the first female GM in men's big four pro sports when she joined MLB's Miami Marlins in November 2020. "It's sort of slow then fast, right?" Chayka said. "With Vancouver taking the first step to be, like, 'This can change.' Jim Rutherford and his group hiring not just one but two (female) AGMs. I think that sends a message that it's about time that there's a different feel and different viewpoint on where women can work in hockey."

Like Madigan, Hunter and Wickenheiser have climbed the ladder internally since they were hired by the Blackhawks and Leafs. Hunter began as then-GM Stan Bowman's executive assistant. In 2020, she was promoted to amateur scout and director of hockey administration. After former assistant GM Kyle Davidson had his interim-GM tag removed in March, Hunter moved into the assistant GM of hockey operations role in June. She's in charge of contracts, budgeting and other departments.

Wickenheiser was named Toronto's assistant director of player development in 2018,

EMILIE CASTONGUAY

MEGHAN HUNTER

then became that department's senior director in 2021. She received her new AGM designation in July. "In hockey, everybody knows the hierarchy of titles," Wickenheiser told the media during Maple Leafs development camp in July. "Certainly, there's been a lot of buzz around it. Nothing changes in my day-to-day of what I've been doing here for the last year, year-and-a-half."

Wickenheiser also confirmed she's currently completing her residency after graduating from medical school in 2021. "It's obviously a huge honor to be working here with the Leafs," she said. "I love what I do every single day. It's been great."

Several top female players, past and present, have also taken player-development roles around the league. Hall of Famer Danielle Goyette is supporting Wickenheiser in Toronto. Current Team Canada captain Marie-Philip Poulin is working with the Montreal Canadiens, and Team USA's captain Kendall Coyne Schofield is a development coach for her hometown Chicago Blackhawks.

Another past U.S. national team captain and Olympic gold medallist, Meghan Duggan, has quickly earned Fitzgerald's trust in two seasons as the Devils' director of player development. "That was my thing, prior, my responsibility," Fitzgerald said. "Meghan has taken it to a new level. And she's awesome to hang with. She reminds me of me, to be quite honest. A female version of me."

Young women aspiring to work in hockey ops are now seeing evidence that there can be a place for them in the game. But it's not always easy to get a foot in the door, especially if you're not a national-team caliber athlete, or if a family member can't help you get a decision-maker on the phone.

To that end, Chayka joined forces this summer with broadcaster Tara Slone and others to support a new development program in the Maritime Junior League. The goal is to create up to 10 hockey-operations positions for women for 2022-23. "I think it's important to get experience for a lot of people," Chayka said. "Getting that first step of exposure, experience, seeing if they even like it. Having the ability to mentor and have more women be involved in sport creates a background and a resume and allows them to make the next step."

The natural next step is to see the NHL's first female GM. So how long will that take? "I feel like we've hit that tipping point where you're seeing people in roles that are just underneath it now," Chayka said. "Typically, AGMs are about two to five years, maybe a little bit more, until they become at least a candidate for GM. I think the next five years, that's more than manageable. But it's about time. Could be any time. Could be tomorrow."

Madigan can also envision a path of succession. "Teams are going to check the boxes, as they should," she said. "It's making sure that there's a qualified candidate – and there are qualified candidates. For these women in these roles, the first step is AGM, people continuing to grow. I would say two to five years would be my hope."

Fitzgerald thinks Madigan's own moment isn't far away. "I think once we have success, people are going to be inquisitive, that's for sure," Fitzgerald said. "I think they'll start inquiring about Kate, and that says a lot about her. She's got a growth mindset. She's curious about how to improve. The sky's the limit for her." H

MOVING UP

These are the six women currently serving as NHL assistant GMs

EMILIE CASTONGUAY

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

Hired: Jan. 24, 2022

Claims To Fame: Played left wing at Niagara University; earned law degree at the University of Montreal; became first female NHLPA-certified player agent in Canada in 2016; repped 2020 No. 1 pick Alexis Lafreniere.

CAMMI GRANATO

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

Hired: Feb. 10, 2022

Claims To Fame: Won Olympic gold medal in 1998; captain of U.S. women's national team; one of first two women inducted into Hall of Fame in 2010; became NHL's first female pro scout with Seattle Kraken in 2019.

MEGHAN HUNTER

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

Promoted: June 22, 2022

Claims To Fame: Sits seventh all-time in points at the University of Wisconsin; Patty Kazmaier Award finalist in 2001; joined the Chicago Blackhawks as Stan Bowman's executive assistant in 2016; was promoted to amateur scout and director of hockey administration on Nov. 23, 2020.

HAYLEY WICKENHEISER

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

Promoted: July 5, 2022

Claims To Fame: Four-time Olympic gold medallist; captain of Canada's women's national team; inducted into Hall of Fame in 2019; earned medical degree in 2021; joined Toronto Maple Leafs' player-development department in 2018.

KATE MADIGAN

NEW JERSEY DEVILS

Promoted: July 6, 2022

Claims To Fame: Earned bachelor's and master's degrees in accounting at Northeastern University; joined the New Jersey Devils in 2017, working in amateur-scouting operations. She has since filled a variety of roles.

ALEXANDRA MANDRYCKY

SEATTLE KRAKEN

Promoted: Sept. 13, 2022

Claims To Fame: Graduated from Georgia Tech with degree in industrial engineering. Work on popular advanced-stats website War-On-Ice led to job with Minnesota Wild. One of Seattle's first hires, where she helped in the job hunt for GM Ron Francis.

CASTONGUAY: PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILIE CASTONGUAY; HUNTER: PHOTO BY CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

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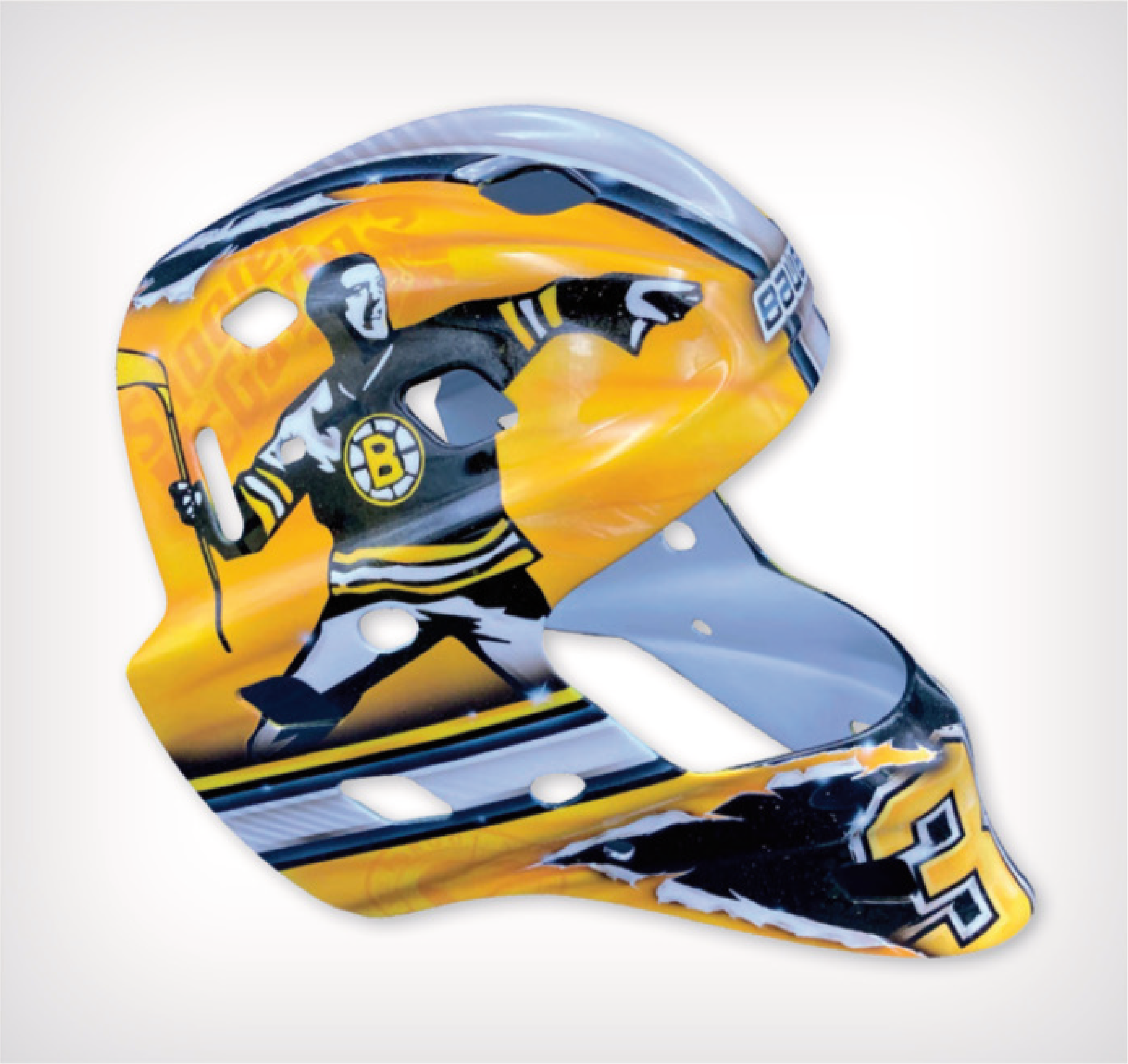

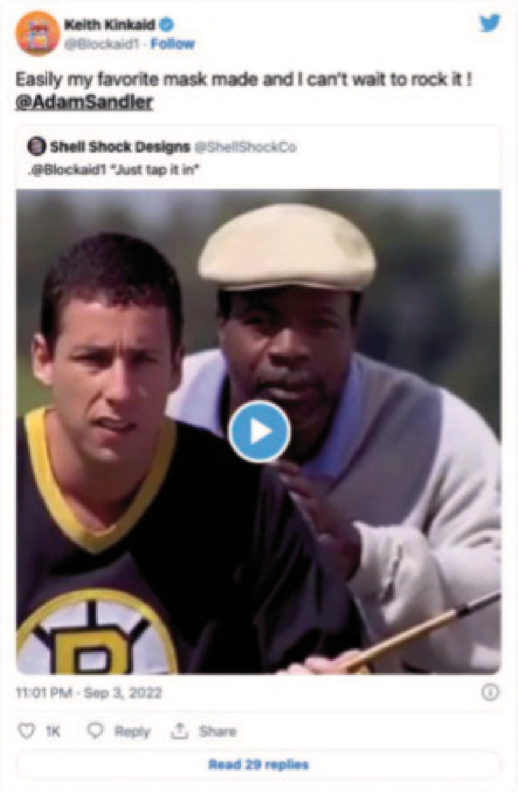

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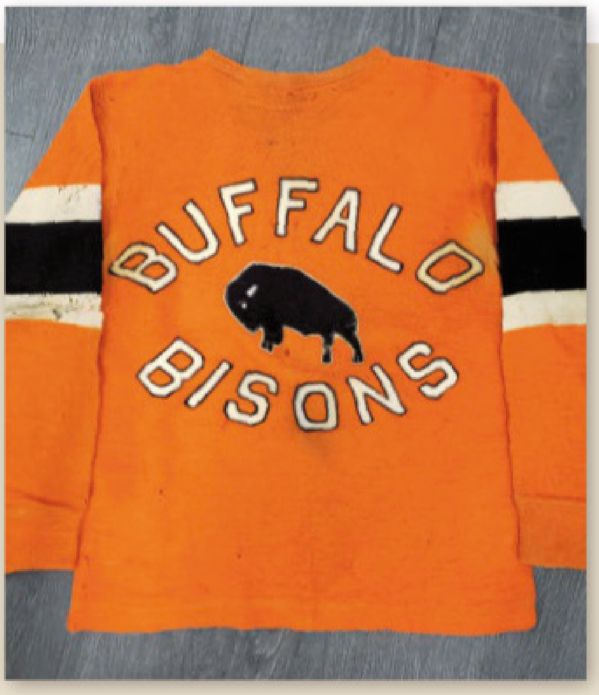
KEITH KINKAID | BOSTON BRUINS

GIVEN THAT KEITH KINKAID was born and raised in New York, who would've guessed that Boston was his happy place? Kinkaid is set to wear what he called "easily" his favorite mask ever, a tribute to '90s comedy classic *Happy Gilmore*. The right panel features the titular hockey-player-turned-golfer, played by Adam Sandler, donning Bruins threads, which he wears throughout the film, including during a dustup with former *The Price is Right* host Bob Barker. **– JARED CLINTON**



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Jersey HOUND

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SOMETIMES GEMS JUST SHOW up in your inbox, as this beauty from the past did, courtesy the Hockey Hall of Fame. Worn by defenseman Allan Murray (who went on to play in the NHL for the New York Americans), this Buffalo Bisons sweater was active sometime in the late 1920s or early '30s, most likely when the team was part of the International League. It was recently donated to the Hall by Murray's family, and we are all the better for it.

According to the Hall's Craig Campbell, receiving a donated sweater – and it's literally a sweater, it's made out of wool – from this era happens maybe a few times a year. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

JERSEY: CRAIG CAMPBELL/HHOF IMAGES; MASK: NOAH ENNIS/SHELLSHOCKPAINT.COM

BIG SPLASH-O-METER

Johnny Gaudreau's 115 points are the most of any cap-era UFA signing, but these six free agents are the next-highest scorers to switch zip codes in that time **BY JARED CLINTON**

SAVARDIAN SIGNING

> MARC SAVARD
97 points with ATL in '05-06; signs four-year, $20-million deal with BOS

Forming a dynamic duo with Ilya Kovalchuk led to Savard's breakout, but he cemented himself as a top-six scoring star in Boston. His first season in Beantown was a team-best 96-point campaign.

OH DANNY BOY

> DANIEL BRIERE
95 points with BUF in '06-07; signs eight-year, $52-million deal with PHI

At the time, Briere's eight-year, $52-million deal was the longest and richest free-agent pact. Unfortunately, Briere failed to reach the same offensive heights, topping out at 72 points as a Flyer.

NAZ TO MEET YOU

> NAZEM KADRI
87 points with COL in '21-22; signs seven-year, $49-million deal with CGY

Kadri might be the new poster boy for upping one's value pre-free agency. The newly minted Stanley Cup champion eclipsed his previous career high by 26 points and cashed in big-time in the process.

GETTING BREAD

> ARTEMI PANARIN
87 points with CLB in '18-19; signs seven-year, $81.5-million deal with NYR

The Rangers' planned rebuild went into hyperdrive upon Panarin's arrival. He's scored 249 points in 186 games on Broadway and helped lead the Rangers to the conference final last season.

HOMETOWN DRAW

> JOHN TAVARES
84 points with NYI in '17-18; signs seven-year, $77-million deal with TOR

Toronto went all-in on Tavares, envisioning him as the missing piece of a championship club. Despite his steady offensive output and strong performances, however, the Maple Leafs remain plagued by post-season demons.

HI, 'LANDER

> MICHAEL NYLANDER
83 points with NYR in '06-07; signs four-year, $19.5-million deal with WSH

Following consecutive career years, Nylander seemed a safe bet, but his age caught up with him. He netted 70 points in 112 games in Washington and was out of the NHL three years into a four-year pact.

SAVARD+KADRI+PANARIN+TAVARES: JOHN SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; BRIERE: JAMES LANG-USA TODAY SPORTS; NYLANDER: DALE ZANINE USA TODAY SPORTS

Kraken
PHILIPP
GRUBAUER
6

In the CARDS

EVER SINCE THE KRAKEN were unleashed, collectors have patiently waited – and waited – for hockey cards of players from the NHL's newest franchise. Yet only a handful of cards picturing Seattle players were released during the 2021-22 season, mainly due to production delays stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

But just as the 2022 Stanley Cup final was winding down, Upper Deck released the Seattle Kraken Commemorative Box Set. Each set has 23 cards of the Kraken's top players from the team's first campaign, plus seven "Inaugural Season Highlights" cards. Sets also include five parallel cards, while one in every 45 sets has a bonus autographed card. **– SAL BARRY**

Inaugural
SEASON HIGHLIGHTS
JORDAN EBERLE
11/4/21 - NETS FIRST HAT TRICK IN KRAKEN HISTORY

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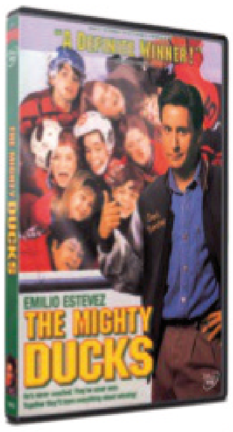
Puck CULTURE

SIX INSPIRATIONS FOR *MIGHTY DUCKS* CHARACTERS



YOU LIKELY KNOW THE Anaheim Ducks were named after the eponymous team from the film *The Mighty Ducks*. But did you know that many characters had real-life inspirations? Steven Brill, who wrote the trilogy of *Ducks* movies, used to attend L.A. Kings games in the 1980s and named most of his characters after NHLers. As the first *Ducks* film celebrates its 30th anniversary this fall, here's a look at the story behind the names of six characters. **BY SAL BARRY**

1 > GUY GERMAINE

Next to Adam Banks, Guy Germaine is arguably the Ducks' most talented player. So it's reasonable to think he was named after Guy Lafleur – heck, Germaine even sports a Habs jersey in the film. Surprisingly, Brill named him after Eric Germain, a minor-league D-man called up by the Kings for four games in 1988.

2 > FULTON REED

The Ducks' resident tough guy with the booming slapshot was named after longtime NHL defender Reed Larson. "He had the heaviest shot," Brill said. "That's why Fulton's last name is Reed, because he has this great slapshot from the blueline."

3 > FRANK HUDDY

Frank Huddy, the young lawyer who butts heads with coach Gordon Bombay early in the film, was played by Brill. The character was named after Charlie Huddy, who was playing defense for L.A. when the movie was released, following 11 years and five Cups with the Oilers.

4 > DAVE KARP

A member of the District 5 Ducks in only the first film, Dave Karp's surname is drawn from an international star. According to Brill, "Karp" was meant as a play on Kharlamov, in reference to Soviet hockey legend Valeri Kharlamov.

5 > CHARLIE CONWAY

The Ducks' captain and heart and soul of the team, Charlie Conway was not named after a hockey player but rather a character from another movie. His name was inspired by Charlie Bucket, the protagonist in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

6 > GORDON BOMBAY

The Ducks' reluctant coach got his name from booze – and Mr. Hockey. "He was named after two kinds of gin, Gordon's and Bombay, because, in the original script, he was drinking gin when he got arrested for drunk driving," Brill said. "But when I saw Gordon's Gin, I thought, Gordon, like Gordie Howe. That's a great connection."

PHOTOS BY DISNEY

TEAM CANADA

#FORFUTUREGROWTH
WELCOME TO
WOMEN'S W
IIHF
2022 IIHF ICE HOCKEY CHAMPIONSHIP

ANDREA CARDIN/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

Keeping Hold Of Gold

Team Canada capped a whirlwind 12 months with its third gold medal in as many major tournaments. But, believe it or not, rust may have been its greatest obstacle

BY JARED CLINTON

EVEN BY THE HIGH standard the Canada-USA rivalry has set, the net-front scramble in the final minute of the 2022 Women's World Championship was chaotic. Stationed within feet of Canadian goalie Ann-Renee Desbiens was a collection of eight of the world's greatest players, Kendall Coyne Schofield among them. And when the American captain had the good fortune to have the puck squirt free to her waiting stick with 38 seconds left in a one-goal game, overtime seemed certain.

What followed, however, was a toe save, followed in quick succession by another. The third stop, the most acrobatic of the bunch, saw Desbiens dive to her left, stretch out her glove and bat away Coyne Schofield's third attempt at tying the game. As a last-ditch effort, the American superstar hoisted the puck goalward only for it to flip, flop and die between Desbiens' pads, the netminder's legs going ramrod stiff to smother the puck and put an end to the madness. "I was like, 'Oh my god, oh my god,' " said Desbiens in reliving the wild sequence. "Then it was just trying to put as many body parts as you can to try to cover the net. I was out of position there after a few saves, but at the end of the day, that's what matters, cover as much of the net as much as you can with your stick, your hand, your head, whatever it is."

For many, the confluence of the timing, the athleticism and the stage will make Desbiens' quartet of game-stealing

RUST, THEN SHINE Team Canada shook off some early-tourney rust to capture its third gold in just over a calendar year.

JENNER: ANDREA CARDIN/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES; POULIN: MATT ZAMBONIN/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

saves the lasting image of Canada's victory. The play will also stand as an excellent exclamation point on what has been one of the best stretches of success in the history of the international game. But ask around the Canadian dressing room and Desbiens' stops will be seen less as another show of the country's unequalled star power than as a microcosm of the attribute that defined Canada's 12th World Championship gold.

The way Desbiens, coach Troy Ryan and star forward Brianne Jenner see it, this win was all about grit. "Was it as smooth a tournament as the Olympics was for us?" Jenner said. "I don't know if I'll ever play in a tournament like that, where everything was just firing on all cylinders as it was in Beijing. So, we had to dig a bit deeper, find a different way to win, a grittier way to win. We talked about that. Even though things aren't going as smooth as we hoped through the round-robin of the tournament, obviously having that loss early on to the States, we were still really confident we were going to find a way."

UGGERHØJ
med dig hele vejen

GENEROUS SCORER Jenner's two tallies in the gold-medal game lifted Canada to glory over the rival Americans.

Indeed, that the Canadian team is in agreement about the stick-to-itiveness displayed in Denmark isn't an instance of parallel thought. The need to do what it takes and to win ugly when necessary was actively discussed in the Canadian room, and in large part for the reasons at which Jenner hinted: that this tournament brought with it obstacles Canada didn't find itself facing on its run to gold several months earlier at the Beijing Olympics. Chief among those obstacles, and perhaps surprisingly so, was the overwhelming feeling among the Canadian staff and roster upon arriving at the worlds that there was an unexpected level of rustiness. Despite playing more games and in more high-stakes competition over the past 13 months than at arguably any point in program history, the Canadians felt as though they were a half-step slow, the smallest of margins off.

The culprit? Ryan likened it to the so-called Stanley Cup hangover – or, in this case, a post-Olympic hangover.

After a gruelling schedule, which began with a post-pandemic World Championship in Calgary in August 2021 and continued at a breakneck pace through the Olympics in February 2022, Canadian players and coaches alike needed time to rest and recuperate after capping the quadrennial cycle with the coveted gold. And while necessary, the break meant limited time to get back up to game speed. What few expected, however, was just how long it would take Canada to feel it had its feet.

In Ryan's mind, it wasn't until the team put a voice to what many were feeling that real momentum built. "Sometimes just acknowledging it makes it OK to have some of the feelings and thoughts we were having," he said. "The fact we were able to do that led everybody to collectively agree that all right, we probably have to do something a little different, a little special to find a way to win this

MARIE-PHILIP **POULIN**

SHUTTING IT DOWN Desbiens held down the fort late in the gold-medal game, denying Coyne Schofield more than once.

MATT ZAMBONIN/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

one. That honestly was the whole conversation. 'We may have to win this with defense, a little bit of grit, a bit of jam, a little bit of attitude.' "

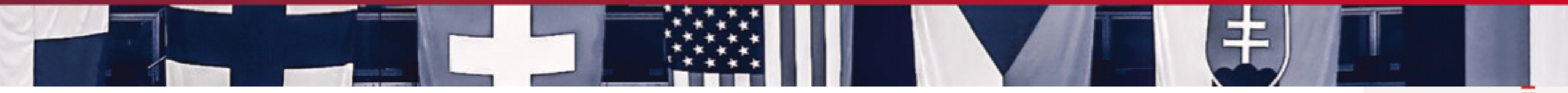
Integral to executing a more resolute style was the play of the leadership group, and Ryan highlights captain Marie-Philip Poulin stepping up to block a shot in the final's waning moments. He's also quick to point out his entire leadership group was on the ice when the game was on the line, Jenner included. It wasn't the only way Jenner came up big that night. She scored both Canadian goals in the 2-1 win, the tallies first pulling her level with and later sending her one point clear of Cassie Campbell-Pascall and Gillian Apps in all-time scoring across their national-team careers.

> **We felt last August, when we had our first win in a long time, we felt this was the start of something**
>
> **– Brianne Jenner**

But as much as the final was about vets coming up big, the tournament as a whole saw the youth movement continue in earnest. Much has been written about budding megastar Sarah Fillier – and she again stood out, the only Canadian to make the tourney all-star team, on the back of her team-best five goals and 11 points – but the 25-and-under contingent impressed as a unit. The cohort of eight skaters combined for 12 goals and 35 points. "Seeing players like Ella Shelton, Ashton Bell, the way they contributed on the back end is just so exciting," Jenner said. "Obviously, Fillier up front and Emma Maltais, and I can go on and on. They've been a huge part of our success, and we're so lucky. That youthful energy brings a lot of fun to the dressing room, too."

Of course, whether it's been by style or by substance, it hasn't been hard for Canada to find joy at the rink, given its unprecedented run. On the heels of a gold-medal dry spell dating back to the 2014 Olympics, one podium-topping finish in any given year was cause for celebration. Three in little more than 365 days? That's another matter altogether.

Humble as she may be, even Jenner admits she isn't entirely shocked. "We felt last August, when we had our first win in a long time, this was the start of something," she said. "We had our goals in mind, to win two in the last year, and with worlds being in August again, it's basically three within almost a calendar year. I just feel really grateful to be a part of it, the way we've turned our program around. Our leadership, Gina Kingsbury, and our coach, Troy Ryan, have really built a strong culture and a strong environment. It's something I feel so fortunate to be a part of." **H**



CARLA
MACLEOD

ANDREA CARDIN/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

The Right Recipe

Under MacLeod's watchful eye, Czechia announced its arrival as a medal threat on the international scene

BY **JARED CLINTON**

WHEN TRYING TO EXPLAIN how she tackled a near-Herculean task and helped Czechia to a bronze-medal victory at the 2022 Women's World Championship, coach Carla MacLeod compares herself to a chef.

Coaching, she said, is like stepping into the kitchen: you must go in with a recipe, a course of action that can transform a pile of individual parts into one cohesive unit. In her nine-to-five as bench boss of the University of Calgary Dinos, for instance, MacLeod has fiddled with those directions – say, a pinch more puck possession or an extra splash of strong-side support. Just as vitally, MacLeod, who won gold on Team Canada's blueline twice at the Olympics and once at the worlds, has been able to ensure she has just the right components to execute a plan to perfection.

But what often separates the short-order burger flippers from the Michelin-starred masters of the coaching world isn't what they do when gifted the perfect players and an abundance of time. It's what they do with the pressure on, when the ask is to reshape and remold what's at their disposal into more than the sum of its parts.

And in Denmark, little more than four months after taking on the Czechia coaching gig, the latter is precisely what MacLeod and her staff did. "We entered into the kitchen and just saw what ingredients we had, and from those ingredients, we built the meal," MacLeod said. "We didn't have enough time to go say, 'Well, we need to change A, B and C and just keep going.' Our job was to make us play to our strengths even better than they've done in the past."

Of course, the medal, a historic first in either worlds or Olympic play for the nation, is a testament to how well Czechia played to those strengths. And to her credit, MacLeod is quick to commend the foundation put in place by former coach Tomas Pacina, now in a development coaching role with the Toronto Maple Leafs. Under Pacina, Czechia had instituted a puck-possession style that guided it to what was, to that point, its greatest successes. Notably, the Pacina-coached Czechs finished seventh at the worlds in 2021, and then booked a ticket to their first Olympics, where they finished seventh in 2022.

MacLeod's earliest course of action was simply getting to know her charges and building meaningful relationships with the roster – connections she believes were integral to the team's success. But her most transformative on-ice initiatives weren't wholesale changes – they were the minor adjustments she thought would yield immediate results. She played the team clips of Olympic action where prolonged possession resulted in no more than shots from the perimeter, and she preached the need for a net-front presence. Later, she iterated on that idea to add plays to the backside of the net. The changes bore out in the results. Only Teams USA and Canada eclipsed Czechia's 28-goal output.

"When you're in a short-term competition, you're constantly evaluating what matters now and what matters next," MacLeod said, later adding that while Czechia's defensive-zone coverage wasn't perfect, it remained largely unchanged as it wasn't actively hurting the team. "I thought as a staff and as a team, that's what allowed us to have some success. We didn't bite off more than we could chew. We just focused on the ingredients we had and made the best dish out of it that we could."

The question now, as it often is as women's international play sees increased parity, is what comes next. While the team's success might seem the best harbinger of what is to come, perhaps as positive a sign were the individual performances. Blueliner Daniela Pejsova and center Katerina Mrazova were among the tourney's scoring leaders, and 16-year-old standout Adela Sapovalivova was surprisingly effective in her first major senior competition. And goalie Klara Peslarova built on her Olympic all-star performance by earning a spot on the worlds' all-star team.

What MacLeod wants to ensure, though, is success is measured appropriately. To her, that isn't necessarily by the scoreboard. By achieving what they did at the 2022 worlds, Czechia has taken a sizeable step forward as a medal threat. But what MacLeod, now the first woman to coach a European team to a worlds medal, most wants to see is the continued growth of her team's overall game.

"At the end of the day, the results will be what they are," she said. "We have a new challenge at the next worlds. We've never played in the A pool in the round robin. We have a lot of uncharted waters in front us. To me, the journey is quite young and just beginning, but our starting point is unique and hopefully our level of confidence is at an all-time high." H

Stankoven Steps Up

Led by the surging Dallas Stars prospect – and McTavish, of course – the Canadians captured another gold. But Finland continues to nip at their heels as a full-on WJC powerhouse

BY RYAN KENNEDY

FOR THE MOST PART, the 2022 World Junior Championship was a flop. Rescheduled from its usual winter-holiday slot due to COVID-19, the tournament was played during amazing summer weather in Alberta at a time when opinions on Hockey Canada could not have been much lower. Attendance was friends-and-family until the gold-medal game – and even then, it wasn't a full house in Edmonton for Canada's 3-2 dramatic overtime win over Finland.

Having said that, for the kids who played, this world juniors provided an opportunity to develop against top-level competition and set the table for fall training camps. Perhaps no one did so better than Dallas Stars prospect center Logan Stankoven.

Anaheim's Mason McTavish was the MVP of the tourney for the gold-medal Canadians after piling up 17 points and miraculously batting down a Topi Niemela shot in overtime that would have won Finland the crown. But Stankoven was just as prominent in the medal round and really took advantage of his time.

With several members of the December team opting out of the summer edition, Stankoven went from depth forward to scoring-line sensation on a trio with Columbus' Kent Johnson and Philadelphia prospect Ty Foerster. From the disappointment of the tournament's original postponement to a gold medal in August, it was, needless to say, a journey. "It's been a lot of ups and

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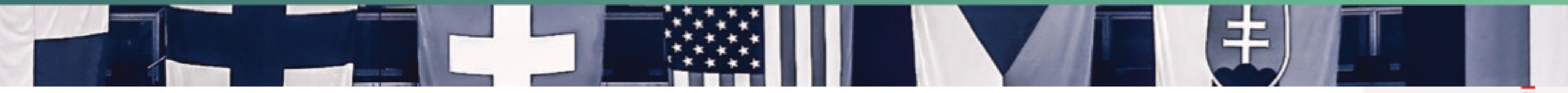


SUMMER CELLY
It was an unusual event, but the '22 WJC got a usual champ as Canada won its third title in five years.

EEMIL VIRO & **LOGAN STANKOVEN**

downs," Stankoven said. "It was a whole different situation for myself back in December. I was more the 13th, 14th forward trying to find my spot in the lineup. Obviously coming back, with some guys missing, I was in a bigger role, and I tried to embrace it as much as possible. As the tournament went on, myself and my linemates were able to create more chances and have more success."

On top of the line's scoring production, they also showed an incredible battle-level, including Stankoven throwing big hits with his 5-foot-8, 170-pound frame and all three forechecking hard. "Everybody in this tournament is here for a reason and everyone is skilled," said Stankoven, 19. "So if you can take that compete level to the next level and get in the dirty areas and take pucks to the net, good things will happen."

Perhaps the most entertaining aspect of the line was Johnson's penchant for behind-the-back passes, with Stankoven usually the recipient. Those moves led to several goals and scoring chances, and, in a fun twist, it was Stankoven's backhand feed to Johnson that resulted in the golden goal in overtime just moments after McTavish's incredible defensive play. "It was a good way to end things off," Stankoven said. "He made some great passes and plays to me, so for me to return the favor was a good feeling."

Not bad for a couple of kids who hadn't played together before the tournament. "He's really smart, he's got a great shot and he's a good passer," Johnson said. "He's a really good player. Really nice kid, very humble and just great to be around."

It was a fantastic few months for Stankoven, who plays for the WHL's Kamloops Blazers. He helped the Blazers go on a long playoff run that ended in the seventh game of the semifinal against Seattle before he was eventually named WHL and CHL player of the year. Stankoven pumped in 104 points in 59 games (and 31 in 17 postseason games) to earn those honors.

So his outburst at the WJC wasn't entirely unexpected, according to Dallas Stars director of player personnel Rich Peverley. "He had a phenomenal playoffs for Kamloops," Peverley said. "He has always been a very motivated player in terms of off-ice strength and conditioning, and there's never a question about his willingness to become a hockey player. That translates to his game, especially in the playoffs this year, he dominated. When the game is on the line, he's the guy to go the extra mile or do the dirty work to win the game. And his performance in

ONE FOR THE AGES
McTavish batting the puck off the goal line in OT will go down as an all-time great WJC moment.

CHRIS TANOUYE/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

the WHL playoffs moved right into the world juniors."

This season will be an intriguing one for Stankoven. There's always the possibility he forces his way onto the Dallas roster, but if he goes back to junior, he'll be doing so on a Kamloops team that hosts the Memorial Cup – meaning the Blazers will likely load up on even more talent and have Stankoven back in a leadership role after he captained the team last season. And with a guaranteed spot in the tournament, the Blazers are guaranteed to have pressure situations for Stankoven and teammates such as Toronto prospect Fraser Minten and Matthew Seminoff (Dallas) to develop in. "We want players who know how to win," Peverley said. "And whenever you can win a Memorial Cup or an AHL championship, that's going to make you a better professional."

In terms of pro traits, Stankoven has impressed Peverley and the Stars with his commitment off the ice to strength and conditioning. "It's just work ethic and the want to get better each and every day," Stankoven said. "I feel like I put in a lot of work over the past couple of years to solidify myself as a player who the coach can rely on in all situations."

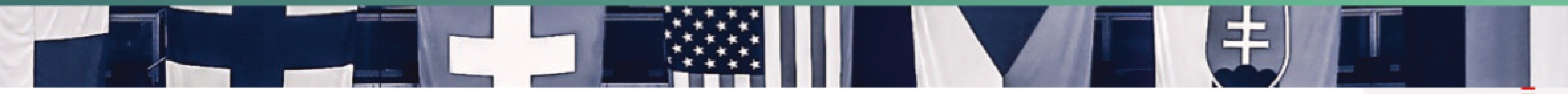
31
JATKOLA
BAUER
13
NSON

CHRIS TANOUYE/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

One of the most impressive aspects of Stankoven's run was in the faceoff dot. Stankoven won nearly 73 percent of his draws in Edmonton. The next-best player was Team USA's Dominic James, who was just a shade below 64 percent. In the semifinal against Czechia, Stankoven went a mind-boggling 21-2 on faceoffs.

> **I feel like I put in a lot of work over the past couple of years to solidify myself as a player who the coach can rely on in all situations**
>
> **– Logan Stankoven**

But can a 5-foot-8 sparkplug succeed down the middle in the NHL? Tampa Bay's Brayden Point has proven that a smaller pivot can indeed be elite, and while there's no guarantees with Stankoven, the Stars certainly aren't shutting the door on the notion of using him at center. "When he was drafted, I think a lot of people probably saw him as a winger because he played on the wing at the world under-18s in Texas," Peverley said. "Now, go back to Kamloops, and the majority of his time was at center, and he was the CHL MVP at center. People may discount his ability to play center in the NHL because of his size, but my argument is, when do you ever see him get knocked down? He's incredibly strong on his feet, he's got a motor and he *goes*. You want big centers, but you also want strong guys who win battles."



Peverley would like to see Stankoven get even quicker and lengthen his skating stride so he can be a fast forward who is hard to play against, but he has already seen improvements in that area. Stankoven is looking like a draft-day steal after the Stars took him 47th overall in 2021, and his performance in the medal round directly propelled Canada to a gold medal.

As far as the runners-up, Finland once again took Canada right to the edge, and it's fair to say that when it comes to WJC powers, we're looking at the top two countries right now. For years, Finland was seen as a scrappy underdog, and while the team still plays with great structure and defensive awareness, they're also churning out skill players consistently. "It's a pretty common style in Finland to use teamwork, and if we want to have success, we have to play like a team," said coach Antti Pennanen. "We have those weapons, but those offensive players also understand they have to follow our systems, that's one of the reasons we've been so successful. The players understand, and they want to be team players."

In the past decade, the gold medals have been split quite evenly between Canada (four), Finland (three) and the Americans (three). Finland has also reached the semifinal four years in a row, something neither of the North American teams can claim. With Russia suspended from international play and Sweden still fighting a medal-round mental block (though they did secure bronze in coach Tomas Monten's final tournament), Finland has rightly risen to the top of the pile alongside Canada and, when they get good goaltending, the United States.

Now, we get an historically short turnaround for the next WJC, which will take place in Halifax and Moncton over the winter holidays, as per tradition. Based on the players eligible to return, Canada will once again be a gold-medal favorite – but you can't count out the Finns, no matter who they have in their lineup these days.

SHOW ME A HERO
Johnson's OT winner, off a backhand pass from Stankoven, sent the Edmonton crowd into a frenzy.

ANDRE RINGUETTE/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

JESPER **WALLSTEDT**

Captain **Goalie**

Wallstedt can't wear the 'C,' but the calm keeper would have it 'for sure' if he could

BY RYAN KENNEDY

SWEDEN EARNED A BRONZE medal at the world juniors in Edmonton, and the two biggest factors for the national side were captain Emil Andrae, a Philadelphia Flyers pick, and goaltender Jesper Wallstedt. In fact, Wallstedt was named the tournament's best goalie by the IIHF and the media, even if he wrongly blamed himself for a round-robin loss to the United States. "I'm quite hard on myself," Wallstedt said. "I have high expectations for myself, but that's how I want it to be. If I'm not good enough, I'm going to tell myself that and tell everyone else that. But it just shows my ability to bounce back and get those wins."

Drafted 20th overall by the Minnesota Wild in 2021, Wallstedt has been on the radar for several years. Last season, he posted the best goals-against average in the SHL with a 1.98 mark for Lulea. He was even better at the WJC in Edmonton, with a 1.62 GAA and .940 save percentage. For a Swedish team that had trouble scoring in the WJC – defenseman Andrae led the team in points – getting excellent goaltending was key. "He was the best goalie in the tournament," said Swedish coach Tomas Monten. "He has good experience, and he's a tremendous person and leader. If you could put a 'C' on a goalie, he would have it for sure. And he's calm. The feeling on the bench, even if he fumbled the puck sometimes, was that Jesper had this."

Now, after years developing in Sweden, Wallstedt is in North America for the next stage of his career. He turns 20 in November. Getting reps in the AHL with Iowa will help, but it's certain he'll see time in Minnesota in the near future.

XXXX

SLAFKOVSKY

SKY HIGH ON Juraj

ERIC BOLTE-USA TODAY SPORTS

The hulking Slafkovsky shares a handshake with NHL commissioner Bettman on stage in Montreal.

Juraj Slafkovsky knows that some Canadiens fans weren't thrilled with his selection at No. 1 overall, but he says Montreal is 'the best spot in the world' for him. And he's ready to prove why

BY KEN CAMPBELL

THE KID HAD JUST come off the ice after killing a penalty in one of the most important games of his life, and the coach was a little concerned about throwing him out there again on the next shift. The kid was Juraj Slafkovsky, and the coach was Craig Ramsay, who claims to have "played a little and coached a little," which is tantamount to proclaiming that Serena Williams kind of knows her way around Wimbledon. "I hadn't used him a lot for that," said Ramsay of Slafkovsky, "because he was a boy."

ON TOP OF THE WORLDS
Slafkovsky led Team Slovakia in scoring at the worlds after doing the same in Beijing in February.

ANDREA CARDIN/HHOF-IIHF IMAGES

But what a boy. At 6-foot-3 and 218 pounds, Juraj Slafkovsky is a boy in the same way Hercules was when he was strangling serpents in his cradle. Anyway, Slafkovsky came off the ice late in the penalty, and Ramsay knew full well the boy-man was supposed to be out for the next shift on the left side of a line with Pavol Regenda and Milos Roman. But this being the Olympics and the boy not even being old enough to buy a beer, let alone get double-shifted against men, Ramsay was about to call out another name until he looked down the bench at Slafkovsky. “He was staring back at me, shaking his head, saying, ‘I’m OK,’ ” Ramsay said. “He wanted to be out there, so he was glaring me down. It was his turn to go, and he was ready.”

We tell you this story to let you know that Shane Wright isn’t the only talented teenager in the world capable of staring down powerful men in hockey. Wright, the consensus No. 1 pick of the 2022 draft until he wasn’t, was eventually taken fourth overall by the Seattle Kraken. Many speculated Wright threw visual daggers at the Montreal Canadiens’ draft table between smiles with commissioner Gary Bettman, three picks after the Habs made Slafkovsky the first-ever No. 1 pick from Slovakia. Wright later denied that was his intent, but he certainly didn’t look happy. And Twitter declared Wright was giving the Canadiens the death stare, so it must be true. But if the true intent of Wright’s stare is unknown, there was no misinterpreting Slafkovsky’s eye contact with Ramsay on the bench at the Olympics.

The fact Slafkovsky wants to be *the guy* hardly makes him unique among the sublimely talented young men populating the NHL today. Aided by the best coaching, resourc-

SLAFKOVSKY

ERIC BOLTE-USA TODAY SPORTS

es, competition, technology and a solid sense of self, rookies now enter the league brimming with confidence and the feeling they can not only survive – but thrive – in the world's most competitive environment.

As the Olympics progressed and the hockey world watched a star born before its eyes, Slafkovsky felt he had proven to his coach and teammates that he needed to be out on the ice. And he was right. Slafkovsky scored seven goals for the Slovaks – including their first three and four of their first six – to lead scorers in the tournament. Then, in the World Championship three months later, Slafkovsky led his country again with three goals and nine points in eight games. "There are kids who want to be there, they want to be that guy," Ramsay said. "And that's invaluable in the NHL, not being afraid and wanting to be that person. When you look down the bench, they're looking at you, and they want to go. That's a key issue if you're going to be a player in the National Hockey League. You want to be out there in all the tough situations. You have to want to be there. And he wants to be that guy."

The Canadiens, who finished last season as the 32nd-best team in a 32-team league, are counting on that being the case. And they're counting on Slafkovsky delivering the way he did at both the Olympics and the World Championship.

That's why the Canadiens made the bold move of taking Slafkovsky over Wright, the latter of whom might have had the most disappointing 94-point season of any prospect in history.

Judging by what some scouts and NHL executives were saying in the weeks leading up to the draft, some other teams would have made the same decision if only they had the good fortune of being as putrid as the Canadiens were last season. But Slafkovsky certainly wasn't the player of choice among Habs fans. When the prospects were walking the red carpet before the draft in early July, the fans outside the Bell Centre were chanting Wright's name in unison. When Slafkovsky made his entrance, they booed him. "Maybe some of them didn't like me," Slafkovsky said, "but I'll do everything to play good for this team, and they will actually like me someday."

All of this, of course, will be forgotten if Slafkovsky can produce the way the Canadiens think he's capable of producing in the long run. If not, the young man and the organization will be in for a rough ride. Since 1969, the last year the NHL gave the Canadiens unfettered choice over the most talented players in Quebec, the

> “MAYBE SOME OF THE FANS DIDN'T LIKE ME. BUT I'LL DO EVERYTHING TO PLAY GOOD FOR THIS TEAM – Juraj Slafkovsky

Canadiens have owned the first overall pick three times, and they faced a vexing decision each time.

The first was in 1971, when GM Sam Pollock manipulated the draft to get the first pick from the California Golden Seals. The Habs were faced with a choice between Guy Lafleur, who was dominating the Quebec junior league and Marcel Dionne, who had left the province as a teenager and was doing the same in Ontario. Even though Dionne had better career numbers on worse teams, we'll go ahead and say Montreal made the right pick. (Although it's intriguing to think of what Dionne could have accomplished taking Lafleur's place on those great Habs teams.)

In 1980, Montreal had the first choice again because of Pollock's dealings (he got it in 1976 from the Colorado Rockies). The choice came down to Denis Savard – a small but supremely talented player and puck wizard coming off a 181-point season with the Montreal Juniors – and Doug Wickenheiser, a projected power forward who had piled up 170 points in the WHL. Under new GM Irving Grundman, the Canadiens went with Wickenheiser in one of the biggest swings-and-misses in NHL draft history.

This time, however, the Canadiens actually earned the first overall pick by being abysmal and winning a lottery. It will be years before we know whether they made the right choice, but as Montreal's new co-director of amateur scouting, Nick Bobrov, said after the Canadiens made the pick: "It's not about finding who is most ready to play tomorrow. It's trying to find the best player some years from now, who will be continuing to be the best player, and we believe Juraj is that person."

All of which makes Canadiens fans, who have watched this organization fail miserably in the first round of the draft for the better part of a decade, probably feel a bit better. When the Canadiens dealt 2017 first-rounder Ryan Poehling to the Pittsburgh Penguins as part of the Jeff Petry trade, it closed the book on the darkest decade ever for the Canadiens in terms of drafting and developing players.

There is nothing to suggest Slafkovsky will not be ready to play in the NHL immediately, but it appears the days of the Canadiens rushing their young players – and putting them into situations they're unprepared for – are over. Nobody wants to talk about what will happen if Slafkovsky can't cut it in the best league in the world next season, but let's never forget that Joe Thornton had three goals in his first NHL season. Mark Messier had one in his first pro season with the Cincinnati Stingers and Indianapolis Racers of the World Hockey Association. The new regime running the Canadiens' hockey-operations department simply cannot afford to mess this one up.

I ALWAYS WANTED TO PLAY SOMEWHERE WHERE THEY LOVE HOCKEY. I THINK I'M PROBABLY IN THE BEST SPOT IN THE WORLD FOR THAT – Juraj Slafkovsky

GEORGE WALKER IV-USA TODAY SPORTS

The early results are encouraging. When the Habs were in the final stages of deciding which player they would take No. 1, they met with Slafkovsky, with team president Geoff Molson sitting in on the meeting. By all accounts, Slafkovsky blew them away with his maturity and infectious personality.

Then, during Montreal's rookie-development camp after the draft, Slafkovsky amazed those in attendance by almost becoming the first person in history to make a stationary bike take off. He pedalled it so hard it was shaking. Upon stepping off the bike after barely breaking a sweat, Slafkovsky was asked whether he had damaged the bike. "For sure," was his response. "I want to damage everything in here." We're not sure what that even means, but apparently, Beast Mode has something to do with it. When Montreal GM Kent Hughes spoke with Slafkovsky about leaving home as a teenager and living on his own in Finland, the GM asked the player how he cooked his meals. "He said, 'With a stove,' " Hughes said. "He's very independent. He's confident without being arrogant."

It would probably be wise to point out the NHL's scrap heap is heavily populated by players who stunned NHL scouts during the interview process, then couldn't back up their words on the ice. They could probably make a pretty good omelet when they were teenagers, too. By contrast, there were NHL people who thought Evgeny Kuznetsov was too much of a risk based on his interview and others who didn't like what they heard from Tyler Toffoli when the shy and stuttering teen met with them.

Other players could skate circles around their peers and could probably win an Olympic decathlon if they trained for it, but they couldn't score 10 goals in the NHL if they were spotted the first nine. And that's the risk you take when you draft an 18-year-old kid and project him as a 23-year-old player. By all accounts, Slafkovsky is a wonderful young man on and off the ice. He laughs easily, plays with an edge and showed in the Olympics he could protect the puck against players who had already played in the NHL. But the fact is that you never know until you know.

SLAFKOVSKY
TOUR 1
CHOIX 1

ALL SMILES
The partisan crowd at the Bell Centre gave Slafkovsky a 'mixed' reaction, but Habs brass were thrilled to secure his services.

ERIC BOLTE-USA TODAY SPORTS

Ramsay had a front-row seat for the evolution of Slafkovsky and believes he'll be fine in the long run.

Five years ago, former NHLer Miroslav Satan, who runs the national teams for his home country of Slovakia, had the idea to bring Ramsay over to help develop players and improve their fortunes in international hockey. On one of his first days in the country, Ramsay went to the grocery store, where a fellow customer predicted he would never succeed there. Two years ago, Ramsay decided to take both Slafkovsky and defenseman Simon Nemec, who went No. 2 to the New Jersey Devils, to training camp for the national team and put them on the World Championship roster. Slafkovsky failed to score a goal in six games in the 2021 worlds and contributed only one assist in three Olympic qualifying games, but Ramsay knew there was more there.

He took Nemec and Slafkovsky to Beijing, even though the latter was struggling for playing time and offense with TPS in the Finnish League. There were times Ramsay wanted to scream, "Just shoot the puck, kid!" to Slafkovsky, but he remained patient, knowing the goals would eventually come. And they did in Beijing, more so than anyone thought possible. He scored a lot of goals, and he scored big goals, including two in the Slovaks' 4-0 win over Sweden in the bronze-medal game. There is a picture of Slafkovsky looking down at his medal with sheer joy in his face. Those who know him best say that picture pretty much sums up his personality.

"It might take some time for him to adjust to the NHL," Ramsay said. "In all my years there, I was always leery of taking a young boy and putting him in that situation because you can cause trouble for them down the road. But I really believe that if 'Slavy' were to struggle early and take a while to adjust, I don't think that would bother him. And I think (Canadiens coach) Marty St-Louis will be a beneficial coach to him. He knows what it's like to have to adjust and have to grow into it. I just hope they give him a chance to adjust and to learn. It took him a year-and-a-half to score a goal (in international play), but even through that, he was playing great. He earned everything he got. Just give him a chance, and I believe he has the potential to be a long-term, really high-end NHL player that you'll want around your team."

As Bobrov said when the Habs drafted him, it wasn't a matter of what other players didn't do that stood out, it was what Slafkovsky did in the white-hot spotlight, how he handled himself, how he got better and more dominant, that made the Canadiens take him first overall.

Shortly after Slafkovsky arrived, journeyman 'D' Chris Wideman offered his No. 20 to Slafkovsky in exchange for a signed jersey for Wideman's newborn son. That's funny because the Canadiens haven't had a player this big and this raw and this talented since Peter Mahovlich, who also wore that number for the club and measured in at 6-foot-5 and 210 pounds. They called him 'The Little M' even though he was way bigger than 'The Big M,' his older brother, Frank. Almost 50 years after getting 82 assists as Lafleur's center, Mahovlich still owns the single-season assist record for the franchise – mind-boggling considering the talent Montreal has had over the years.

If Slafkovsky can even approach what Mahovlich did for the Habs, those boos that rained down on him on draft day will be forgotten. Montreal fans can be excused for envisioning a day when Slafkovsky wreaks havoc through the league with newly named captain Nick Suzuki as his center and Cole Caufield on the right side. Slafkovsky wants that to happen, too. And he's not afraid of embracing the challenge that comes with it.

All he needs now is time. "I always wanted to play somewhere where they love hockey," said Slafkovsky to reporters during rookie-development camp. "I think I'm probably in the best spot in the world for that."

PREMONITIONS GAUDREAU

Johnny Gaudreau putting pen to paper in Columbus came as a shock to just about everyone in hockey – even his new GM. But Gaudreau did his homework, and now, that hard work is ready to pay off

BY JARED CLINTON

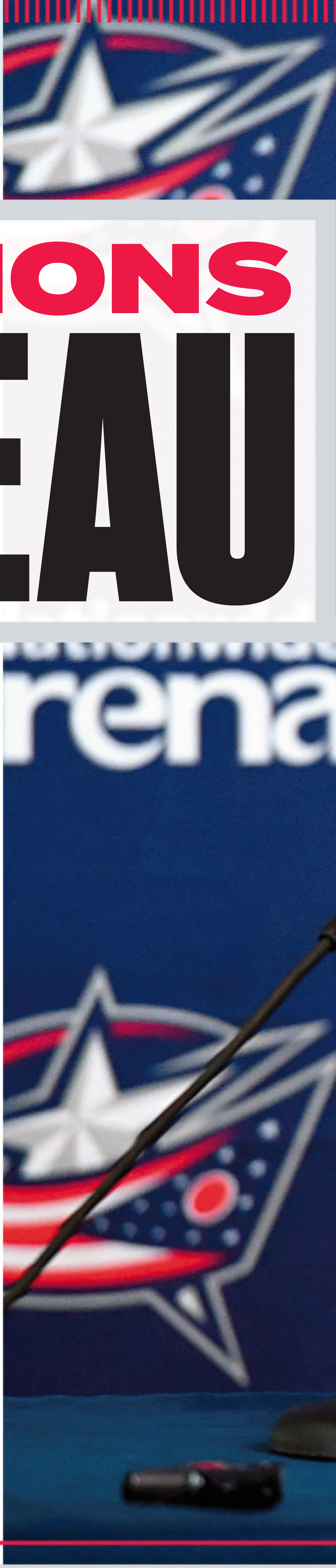
IT WAS CALLED THE Premonitions Bureau, and in mid-1960s Britain, it was psychiatrist John Barker's attempt to establish a database of supposed visions had by everyday individuals and, in some cases, those purporting to have the gift of precognition or psychic foresight. Often, the submissions made by those who contacted the bureau were morbid; tragedy, death and disaster were common fodder. That wasn't so with all. Some, as outlined in Sam Knight's brilliant *New Yorker* reportage-turned-book on the bureau, were far from macabre.

It will, of course, surprise few to learn the vast majority of these premonitions failed to materialize. Ironically, in what was equal parts morose turn of events and an all-time caution of the ills of taking home one's work, one prediction that did come to fruition was that of Barker's untimely death. Two who frequently submitted premonitions had cautioned him such a fate would befall him. All told, though, the submissions that became reality were few and far between and, truthfully, best chalked up to coincidence. Sling enough mud at the wall and some is bound to stick.

This brings us to the NHL Rumor Bot. Now, no one is about to call a Twitter account generating stick-and-puck Mad Libs prophetic, especially not when the entire gimmick is plugging 'X' player into 'Y' scenario or aligning them with 'Z' team. For example, when the account published, back in August 2021, that Johnny Gaudreau had signed with the Columbus Blue Jackets, the absurdity was the supposed joke. Gaudreau? To the Blue Jackets? As a free agent, no less? Yeah, right.

Well, it turns out the only people laughing now are the Blue Jackets and Gaudreau himself, who stunned the hockey world when he signed a seven-year, $68.25-million pact with Columbus in the late hours on free agency's opening day. To outsiders, it was a legitimate shock. To insiders? Even Jarmo Kekalainen can admit he didn't necessarily see it coming. While he touched base and gauged Gaudreau's interest, not even the Blue Jackets GM knew he had the inside track on New Jersey or Philadelphia – perceived frontrunners given their proximity to Gaudreau's hometown.

It wasn't until Gaudreau's camp circled back late in the day that things took off. "We were a bit surprised – pleasantly surprised – that he had chosen us as one of his preferred destinations," Kekalainen said. "We got to it real quick where we said, 'If you guys are really serious,


BEN JACKSON/COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

GAUDREAU

Nationwide Arena
COLUMBUS
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then let's talk serious talk right now. What would it take for him to come here?' And after that, it didn't take very long, actually, to come to a conclusion. There was a bit of delay because our owner was in the air, and a contract of this magnitude needs some approval from him. But once he landed, we got it signed and sealed."

None of that, however, answers the question gobsmacked observers were asking in the moments following the signing: Columbus? Really?

Yes, Columbus. Yes, really. And to hear the GM tell it, it came down to Gaudreau doing what every player should (but many fail to) when deciding their destination: homework.

In the days leading up to free agency, Gaudreau was working the phones, touching base with fellow players and former teammates and considering far more than the number on his paycheque. He didn't just want a team. He wanted a home, a place where he and his wife, Meredith, could put down roots with their first child on the way. "There are teams I was looking at that didn't have that kind of feedback that I got," Gaudreau said. "When players tell you about other teams, you want to be a part of an organization that treats you well, a good fan base, a good place to live, and Columbus had all the checkmarks. It just got me more excited and more excited."

That doesn't mean the process was easy. Weeks after his signing, his surprise at the stress and at his own naivety remained evident. In fairness, Gaudreau wasn't just choosing a new home. He was also making the difficult decision to leave his second one, in Calgary, the only NHL organization he had ever known. The way Gaudreau talks about the gut-wrenching moments, sleepless nights and constant wavering related to departing the Flames, it's as if he shaved a few years off his life. The relationships he built throughout his decade-plus with the franchise were deep and meaningful, and telling Flames GM Brad Treliving it was time to move on wasn't easy.

It wasn't only with Treliving that Gaudreau had a difficult chat. Consider his talks with New Jersey Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald, whose son Ryan played with Gaudreau – and roomed with Gaudreau's brother, Matt – at Boston College. Those connections have brought the families close, but when push came to shove, Gaudreau had to turn Fitzgerald down. "It was a place I was super close to going to," he said. "It didn't work out, but at the end of the day, I'm pretty happy. I feel like I'm in a way better spot for myself and for where my career is at at this time for me to go to Columbus. But it was close."

Close or not doesn't matter now, though. He's in Columbus. Again, yes, Columbus. And, really, Gaudreau is done talking about the whys, and he wants to ensure the what-nows don't get overlooked. And his goal is clear. He wants to transform a Blue Jackets team chock-full of potential into a playoff outfit.

To that end, Columbus inking a player of Gaudreau's caliber can't be undersold. Not only was he the big-ticket item this summer, he's the highest-scoring UFA to switch teams not in the past five years, not in the past 10, but the entire salary-cap era. His 115 points are nearly 20 more than the second-highest scorer in that category. (For the trivia inclined: No. 2 is Marc Savard, who left the Atlanta Thrashers and signed a four-year, $20-million deal with the Boston Bruins in 2006.) The impact Gaudreau can have on Columbus' offense alone is near immeasurable.

Surely, cynics will argue Gaudreau's career-best production was due in no small part to playing alongside Elias Lindholm and Matthew Tkachuk, not to mention on a power play that ranked 10th in the league. But those cynics are overlooking the tantalizing talent Gaudreau will skate with in Columbus. Premier power-play setup man Gaudreau will mesh well with Patrik Laine, whose triggerman tendencies have 'Johnny Hockey' practically drooling. "I don't think I've ever had an opportunity to play with a player with a shot like that," Gaudreau said. "I'll play my game, try to get the puck to him, find him as much as I can, hopefully get him 50 or 60 goals and go from there. That kid, he's got the opportunity to do that, because his shot is first class."

How exactly Gaudreau will be utilized will be the choice of coach Brad Larsen. The logistic requirements of uprooting one's life after eight years north of the border have limited the time coach and player have had to discuss what next season will look like, but the conversations between the two have been productive so far. Most important to Gaudreau is Larsen doesn't expect the 600-game veteran to be someone he's not. As Gaudreau put it, he's not being asked to "come in and change the world."

That's not to say Gaudreau won't have marching orders. Not in the least. Any presumption Gaudreau will shrink from pressure or responsibility is laughable, too. Last season, some predicted Gaudreau would be the oil to Flames coach Darryl Sutter's water, the notoriously demanding coach's style somehow neutering Gaudreau's playmaking. The career-best totals contradicted such forecasts, and Gaudreau is ready for the weight of Larsen's expectations. "I've heard a lot of great things from past players who have played for him, and he's a coach that demands a lot out of his players and wants his team to win games, and that's important," Gaudreau said. "You don't want a coach who just wants to be your friend, you know? You want a coach who wants to win games and expects his players to be at their best."

But what perhaps stands to have the most significant impact on Gaudreau's personal and the Blue Jackets'

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GAUDREAU

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JUST BE JOHNNY

Gaudreau says new bench boss Larsen, left, wants to make sure the slick left winger sticks with the things that make him special.

BEN JACKSON/COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

overall success across the duration of his contract is a matter of influence. Kekalainen has taken careful steps the past two seasons to press reset – he rebuffs the word "rebuild" – in Columbus, carefully executing deals that allowed a restocking of the cupboards. The departures of Nick Foligno, David Savard and Seth Jones were difficult, but the resulting standings tumble paired with acquired draft capital has seen Kent Johnson and Cole Sillinger brought aboard and an injection of talent that gives the Blue Jackets one of the league's strongest prospect crops.

> I'LL PLAY MY GAME, TRY TO GET THE PUCK TO LAINE, FIND HIM AS MUCH AS I CAN, HOPEFULLY GET HIM 50 OR 60 GOALS AND GO FROM THERE – Johnny Gaudreau

How does Gaudreau fit? Kekalainen points to the star acquisition's insatiable work ethic, hunger to improve and the leadership he can provide. "What he's accomplished already in this league so far is remarkable, and you know you're going to get the attention of all the young players on everything that he does," Kekalainen said. "They'll be watching him, observing him, imitating him, doing things that he does and trying to get to the level that he is every day. I know that, for sure. There's nothing better than having a guy who just lives that and does it every day. That's the best kind of leadership."

It's a role Gaudreau is keen on embracing. He cited former Flames captain and current Toronto Maple Leafs rearguard Mark Giordano plus former Calgary teammate Jiri Hudler as two important and positive influences. Gaudreau wants to play the same role for the Johnsons and Sillingers. He also quickly praised Zach Werenski and captain Boone Jenner as two players who are already positive role models for the up-and-coming talent. "When you have those leaders like that," Gaudreau said, "you can add an older guy like myself – I guess I'm an older guy now? That's weird to say that – but when I can come in and maybe help these younger guys, and we can push to make the playoffs, and try to win a few series and go from there, that's exciting to me."

And, in its own way, that is the feeling that remains most difficult to parse, that suddenly very real and very palpable excitement about the Blue Jackets. Understandably, that reads as a slight against the city or franchise. It's not – or at the very least not an intentional one. Rather, it's a comment on where the organization seemed to be in its cycle. Prior to signing Gaudreau, there was little reason to believe this project was anywhere near its completion, nor that a team that finished 21st in the NHL last season and nearly 20 points out of the playoffs would be a draw to free agency's biggest fish.

Suddenly, though, the Blue Jackets are flush with intrigue, and Gaudreau's landing spot no longer seems so strange. So, Columbus? Yeah. Right. "I don't know if statement is the right word, but maybe, finally, we can shed some of this nonsense that we're somehow not a good destination for players, for any of the reasons that are out there," Kekalainen said. "We have a great city. We have a good, young team. We have lots of talent. And it's a definite hockey town with real passionate fans. When players of this caliber have done their homework and choose us, that is the statement right there." H

Nazem Kadri brings his impactful game back to Canada, and the Flames couldn't be happier he'll be a central figure in many future battles of Alberta

BY STEVE MACFARLANE

NO SHORTAGE OF *Swag*

KADRI

C**ALL IT CONFIDENCE OR** cockiness. Swagger or snark. Whatever it is that Nazem Kadri carries with him, it's a tough thing to contain.

After a career offensive season that culminated in a Stanley Cup championship with the Colorado Avalanche, the 31-year-old couldn't hold it in. During his on-ice television interview that night in June, Kadri told his supporters how much he loves them, and then his haters to pucker up. "I love you guys. I've had supporters in my corner from Day 1, never wavered," said Kadri into the TV microphone. "And, uh, for everyone who thought I was a liability in the playoffs, kiss my ass."

And that wasn't the last of the puckering up in the off-season. Kadri, for very good reason, had many suitors as an unrestricted free agent. No one really wants to play against him. He brings a certain snarl and a whole lot of skill. And now championship experience, too.

Cashing in on that epic season, Kadri converted his 28 goals and personal bests in assists (59) and points (87) into a seven-year, $49-million deal in free agency with the Calgary Flames.

And Flames fans have quickly flocked to the supportive side. Funny how a jersey change can do that.

The momentous move came just weeks after the franchise lost the previously largest name on the UFA market in Johnny Gaudreau and the gargantuan trade for Jonathan Huberdeau and MacKenzie Weegar following Matthew Tkachuk's declaration that he wouldn't sign a long-term deal with Calgary.

Kadri was as big a victory as the Huberdeau extension. It was a perfectly executed slow play by the Flames. The hockey world believed the prickly pivot was already committed to a sly Lou Lamoriello and his cap-strapped New York Islanders. Instead, it was the Flames moving out money to bring in the big fish. They parted ways with a former fan favorite in Sean Monahan, moving his $6.4-million cap hit to Montreal.

The Kadri signing was crucial for a team still trying to contend. It was exactly the kind of move the franchise needed to cap off a tumultuous summer of swing.

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> THE BIG STAGE, SOME TENSE UP AND SOME EMBRACE IT. **HE PLAYS ON THAT EDGE** – Flames GM Brad Treliving

Flames GM Brad Treliving turned the early turmoil into a landslide public-relations victory. And it worked out pretty well for the player, too. “The patience definitely did me some good,” Kadri said. “Calgary was always a team that was interested since Day 1, which I definitely respected and acknowledged. I’m going there all business. I’m looking to win. I want to run this thing back, and I think Calgary’s certainly got a great chance.”

There’s that confidence again. He was with a new franchise for all of five minutes before boldly suggesting he could win back-to-back Cups with different teams.

A polygraph would probably show he wasn’t lying, either. After all, he did get to hand-pick his next NHL team. Others offered more, but Kadri was convinced that Calgary is ready to take the next step. Once the Flames shed the cap space, they added the piece they believed was missing in their own playoff run last spring.

On their end, the Kadri courtship involved convincing him this was a championship team. And that Kadri was an essential piece, along with the elite playmaker and top blueliner they added in the Tkachuk deal.

Kadri’s hunger and recent post-season heroics are elements that could help put them over the top. If the Flames had a weakness, it seemed to be shrivelling from the spotlight in their first playoff Battle of Alberta against the Edmonton Oilers in more than three decades.

Kadri doesn’t go quietly, as the world found out in the Avalanche’s march to the Cup. In his playoff stretch, cut to just 16 games due to injury, Kadri scored seven goals and 15 points. One of those goals was an overtime winner in Game 4 of the final.

It was his first game back after a hit from behind resulted in a broken thumb that needed to be surgically repaired. The injury carried a six-week recovery timeline. Kadri returned after two weeks.

He could barely grip a stick and had to have others tie up his skates. The hit came courtesy of Oilers winger Evander Kane, and the two will get plenty of opportunities to re-ignite the provincial rivalry with Kadri now in Calgary. He’s already looking forward to the Battle of Alberta clashes, which remind him of his days with the Toronto Maple Leafs, playing rivals such as the Montreal Canadiens or Ottawa Senators.

It feels like every eye in Canada is watching. Just how Kadri likes it. “Coming back to Canada, I’ve kind of had that in the past with Toronto and

OPENER: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS;
CUP: RON CHENOY-USA TODAY SPORTS

GETTING BETTER WITH AGE

Kadri had a career offensive season at 31 with 87 points. He added another 15 in 16 playoff games en route to his first Cup.

TOP: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; RIGHT: GEOFF BURKE-USA TODAY SPORTS

Montreal. This is very similar," Kadri said. "I think it's something I'm going to adjust to pretty quickly."

Treliving lost an edgy player in the 24-year-old Tkachuk. But he found a way to fill that need with the addition of Kadri. "He's got a unique combination of skill and snarl. The big moments, the big stage, when there's a lot on the line, some tense up and some embrace it. He embraces it, and he plays on that edge, which we value," Treliving said. "He's crossed the edge, he's crossed the line a few times and paid for it. As years go on, you mature to find that balance and stay on the right side of it."

The Flames are getting a more mature Kadri. One who now comes with the winning experience that coach Darryl Sutter covets. It seems as if the two were meant to connect at this stage of their careers. Kadri is looking for more of what he just tasted. Sutter, who took the Flames to the Cup final before losing to Tampa Bay in 2004, is looking to complete unfinished business in his second full season back behind the Flames' bench.

Kadri's presence gives the Flames the kind of center depth that can win titles. He said it himself when eyeing up the roster while making the decision to join the Flames over the Islanders and others. "Our center combos can match up with anybody," he said.

With Kadri, along with Elias Lindholm – a Selke Trophy finalist last season – and Mikael Backlund anchoring the top nine, the Flames have filled a need that helps them match up better with the Oilers' trio of Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins.

Sutter said the Flames' lack of depth at the position was exposed last spring. Kadri is eager to accept this challenge. After all, he did it pretty well for the first couple of games of the Avs' sweep of the Oilers in the Western Conference final. At least until the Kane hit and the broken thumb. "Being around the league for a while, I've been able to play against some great players," Kadri said. "That's something I embrace. I accept that challenge of playing against the best players and the top lines every single night. I've certainly proved I can do that and come out on top. I look forward to that."

You can bet Flames fans are also looking forward to it. It seems as if they manifested the move by posting a deluge of messages on social media suggesting the team should pursue Kadri. That happened for most of the summer, until the stunning announcement was officially made.

As for what comes next, camp and the early season will be a chemistry experiment as Sutter looks for players who complement Huberdeau's elite playmaking and Kadri's 200-foot transition game. Watch for Blake Coleman and Andrew Mangiapane as possible matches, unless the coaching staff decides to stick with Backlund as their center to reunite the team's most impressive playoff trio.

Kadri could hook up with Tyler Toffoli, who is capable of 30 goals but had a streaky few months with the Flames after joining the team just before the trade deadline. Up-and-comer Dillon Dube could also get a look after an 18-goal campaign last year. Options are plentiful in the top nine, and this will be an especially balanced offensive group despite losing two 40-goal scorers.

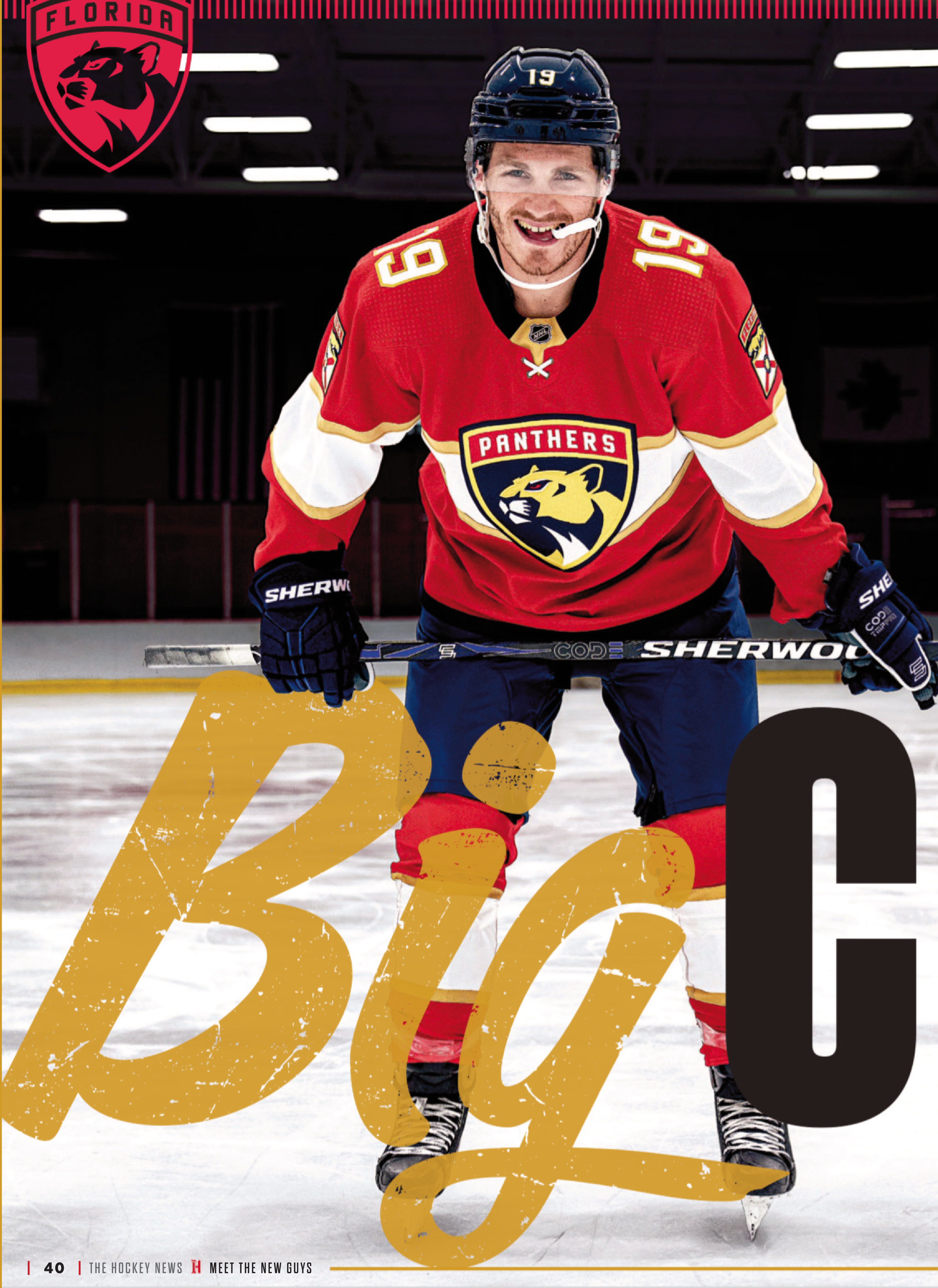
With a big contract comes great responsibility, and Kadri will have plenty of pressure on his shoulders. Expectations will include a point-per-game pace, a power-play presence and an ability to elevate the play of those around him. Most importantly, this franchise needs playoff performers.

Kadri will be looked upon as a leader in that area. But they have to get back to the postseason first. There are no guarantees, but the Flames are a good bet to repeat as Pacific Division champs even with such a foundationally different core group.

Kadri is a big reason for that. "The bright lights and the big stage, he relishes that," Treliving said. "Some cower, others embrace it. He fully embraces that. He's a winner. He's got that attitude, and he's got that aura around him that he's here to play for keeps."

If there's one thing you can safely bet on, it's that Kadri wants to win more than most. "This is somewhere that I really want to be, and I'm going to give it everything I have," Kadri said. "I think the city of Calgary is really going to appreciate that."

There's that confidence again.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Big C

TKACHUK

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHERWOOD HOCKEY

Often brash and always confident, Matthew Tkachuk can drive opponents mad and put the puck in the net – making him the perfect piece for the Panthers as Florida revs up for a Stanley Cup run

BY ERIN BROWN

MATTHEW Tkachuk had not been in South Florida more than a couple hours when he started raising the temperature in an already heated rivalry. The newest Panther began by referring to the Tampa Bay Lightning as the team on “the other end of the state.” And as his introductory press conference started to wind down, Tkachuk stoked the fire a bit more.

“I hate Edmonton,” said the former Calgary Flames winger during his media debut, “but I hate Tampa more now.”

The Miami area flocks to spotlight, swagger and a splash of chaos, and Tkachuk brings it all. He’s supremely talented, confidently brash and locked down for the prime of his career. It is a rare combination unseen in the Panthers’ 30-year history.

Superstars have passed through Florida, but they either had short tenures (Pavel Bure), were traded before their most prolific years (Roberto Luongo) or were wrapping up a storied career (Jaromir Jagr, Luongo again).

Gaining attention in South Florida can be tricky, too. Last season, the Presidents’ Trophy-winning Cats were at times overshadowed by the NBA’s equally successful Miami Heat or the viral in-game antics of local rapper Kodak Black. Tkachuk, however, would like to steal back the limelight and get his teammates basking in it as well. “I hope in a few years, nobody on the team can walk outside without somebody saying something to them,” he said. “Kind of like how it is in some of the other places around the league. I think winning definitely helps that. I’ll take care of it on the ice.”

Panthers GM Bill Zito likens Tkachuk to Jimmy Chitwood, the self-assured hero of the 1986 basketball drama, *Hoosiers*. “I draw a parallel between Matthew and Jimmy, the moment where he says, ‘Coach, I’ll make it,’ ” Zito said. “It’s that type of confidence, give me the ball with 20 seconds on the line.”

The painful sting the Cats felt after a second-round exit to the Lightning only intensified in the off-season. Despite a record-breaking campaign, Florida failed to capture the recognition of awards voters. The Cats sat out the first two rounds of the 2022 draft after trading away the picks for a Cup run. And when free agency began, Florida’s limited cap space resulted in the departures of deadline additions Claude Giroux and Ben Chiarot as well as breakout winger Mason Marchment.

Across the continent in Calgary, Tkachuk informed the Flames in mid-July that he wouldn’t sign a long-term deal. Following a season in which he set career highs with 42 goals, 62 assists and 104 points, he wanted a change of scenery – with Florida as his top destination. “First and foremost, it was (about) winning. Not just winning now, but winning in the future,” said Tkachuk, who also noted the Miami lifestyle and talent on the roster as appealing factors. “I’m 24, and I had six unbelievable years in Calgary. It was the best place for me to be at that time. Looking ahead, I signed for eight years, but in my mind, I’m here for eight-plus. I want to be here for the rest of my career.”

Already spurned by Johnny Gaudreau, who signed with Columbus as a free agent, Flames GM Brad Treliving started working to move Tkachuk, the No. 6 pick in 2016. Craig Oster, Tkachuk’s uncle and agent, reached out to Florida to see if the team had any interest. Zito, a former agent himself, “didn’t really think it was true.”

“It wasn’t even something during the process of evaluating the whole season that we would even fathom could be possible. A 24-year-old, 100-point guy who is tough as nails," Zito said. "You have the ability to get this type of asset, to add to this young core that's growing together. There are areas of the game Matthew brings that we can use collectively in our group. When that materialized as a reality, we had to decide rather quickly this is something we wanted to pursue."

Zito contacted Treliving, and the two had a series of discussions to work out what became the NHL's first true sign-and-trade deal. "At one point, we had a real healthy, lengthy discussion about everything: hockey, South Florida, life, the Panthers, our future," Zito said. "It was really healthy and interesting. I very much enjoyed it."

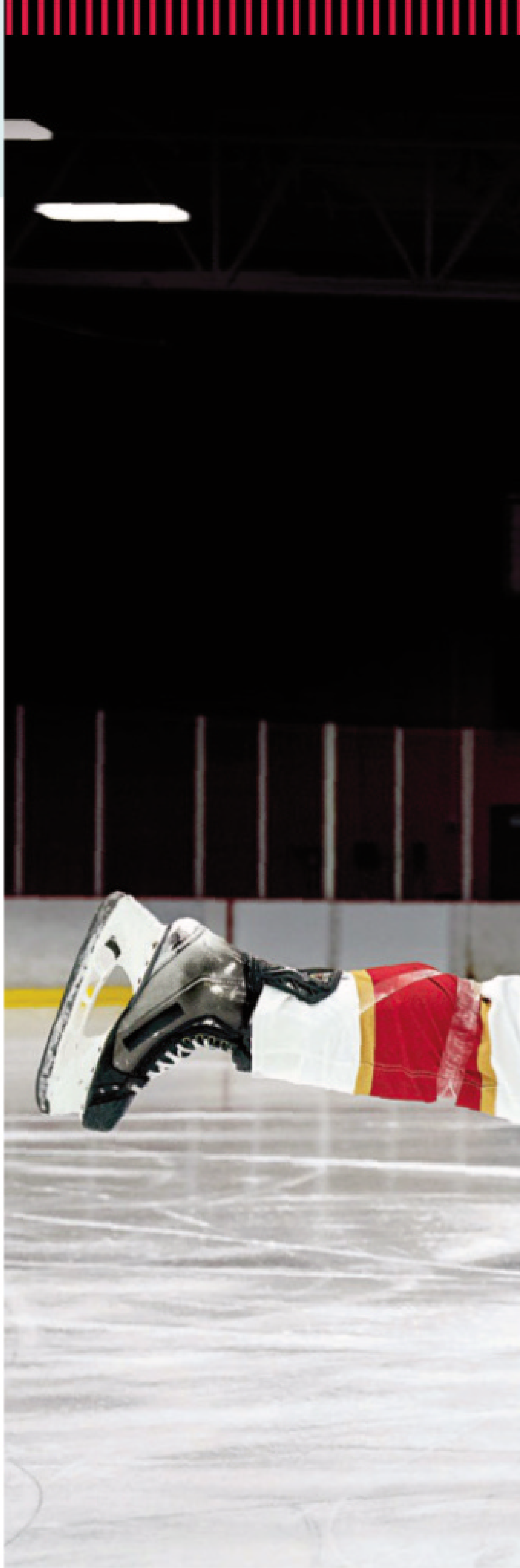
Tkachuk, meanwhile, was vacationing on the Jersey Shore with family and celebrating younger brother Brady's engagement. While at the beach, Tkachuk received a call from Oster, who told him a trade to Florida was in the works and to keep it quiet. "I went to my parents' hotel room and told them," Tkachuk said.

The first step involved the Flames signing Tkachuk to an eight-year, $76-million deal – that's $9.5 million per season – loaded with annual signing bonuses and no-movement/trade clauses starting in 2023-24. Tkachuk received the paperwork during the middle of dinner. He signed and asked his mother, Chantal, to serve as the witness. "I think my dad (former NHLer Keith) was pissed off about that," said Tkachuk, laughing. "She signed it. I went back (to join the family) with the biggest smile ever. Everybody knew something happened."

The moment Tkachuk's pen hit paper, it triggered his move to Florida. The Panthers also received a conditional fourth-round pick. Heading to Calgary were superstar playmaker Jonathan Huberdeau, Norris Trophy dark horse MacKenzie Weegar, sharply rising center prospect Cole Schwindt and a lottery-protected first-round pick in 2025.

Winners and losers are far from determined, though winning a Stanley Cup will probably be the first marker to sway opinion. The Flames and Panthers are both within their windows to do so. The deal was announced close to midnight, and Florida fans woke up to a gut punch. Two fan favorites, who were drafted and developed by the franchise, were gone. On paper, though, it was a necessary sacrifice to sustain a contender. "The price was very high," Zito admitted.

In Tkachuk, the Panthers gain an offensive talent on par with Huberdeau. What sets the former apart is his physical, agitating style and his tendency to shoot more often. And Tkachuk comes at a discounted rate compared to what Huberdeau, who was due a new contract in the summer of 2023, ultimately signed for in Calgary (eight years, $84 million). Tkachuk is also four years younger.



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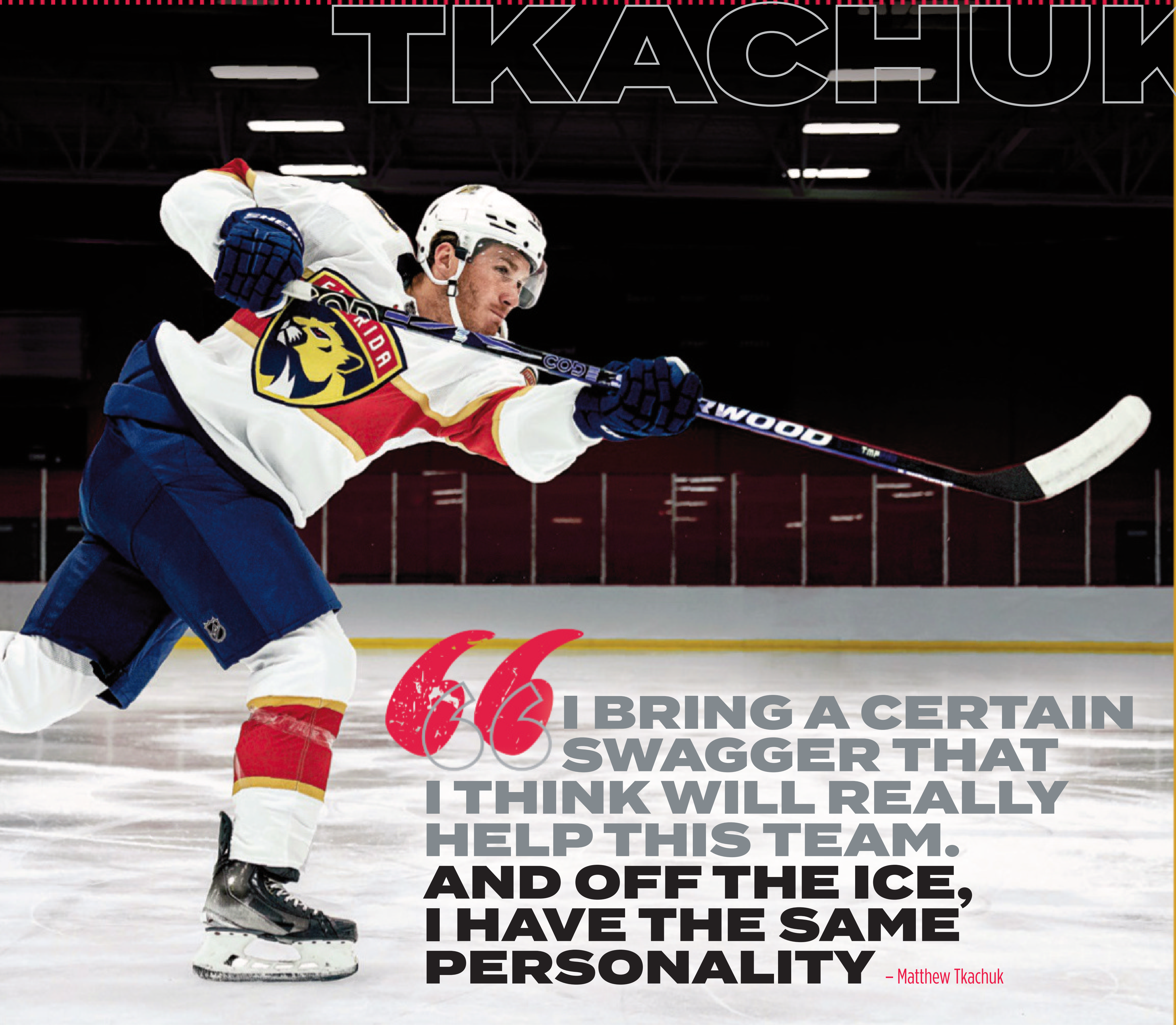
RIVALRY REVELLER

Tkachuk relished the intensity of the Battle of Alberta, and he wasted little time jabbing at Tampa Bay upon his arrival in Florida.

SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

TKACHUK



> I BRING A CERTAIN SWAGGER THAT I THINK WILL REALLY HELP THIS TEAM. AND OFF THE ICE, I HAVE THE SAME PERSONALITY – Matthew Tkachuk

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHERWOOD HOCKEY

The move keeps Florida's window to contend for a Stanley Cup open for the foreseeable future. The Cats also have a personality who can command attention in a competitive local market.

Growing up in Arizona and St. Louis – markets his father played in as an NHLer – Tkachuk is keenly aware of the opportunity and responsibility to further grow the game in Florida. The state is among the fastest-growing regions at the amateur level in the U.S. "It's one of the things that I can help with," said Tkachuk, who won gold with Team USA at the under-18 worlds in 2015 and bronze at the world juniors the following year. "I have a different personality the way I play. I bring a certain swagger that I think will really help this team. And off the ice, I have the same personality. I'm excited for the chance to grow the game down here."

The Panthers may also capture the attention of the greater American hockey fan base. U.S.-born players accounted for almost 30 percent of the NHL last season, but the country's most dynamic stars were out of sight. The top five American scorers all played in Canadian markets. Tkachuk, Gaudreau and Toronto's Auston Matthews were the only Americans to top 100 points. It doesn't hurt, either, that Matthew and Brady Tkachuk will now face off more frequently as Atlantic Division foes. The pair have already provided snapshots of their relationship, and family bragging rights are clearly a part of their bond.

Cameras caught Brady showing off the 'C' on his jersey to his brother – one-upping Matthew's 'A' – after assuming the captaincy in Ottawa. Brady then joined the Flames' faithful during the 2022 playoffs as Matthew's No. 1 fan. At the 2023 All-Star Game in Sunrise, Fla., in February, the brothers may get the chance to play as teammates for the first time in their professional careers.

Florida could stand to use a little bit of Matthew's older-sibling mindset. The Panthers have made monumental progress in the past two seasons, posting a 95-32-11 record. But they have been pushed out of the playoffs by big brother Tampa Bay two years in a row. Tkachuk is ready to help his teammates push back. "I personally haven't been on any teams that have had playoff success," Tkachuk said. "I have that bitter taste in my mouth, just like these teams had the past few years. I think that's a really good thing for part of the fit. I have that hunger to win, and I know everybody else in there does. We have all the tools, all the players, a great coach, unbelievable owner, spend to the cap. There's no excuse why this can't work.

"I want to be here. This wasn't me getting traded with no say. I chose this. I really want this to work, and I'm just excited for the possibility of winning here in South Florida." H

THE Force AWAKENS

JAMES CAREY LAUDER-USA TODAY SPORTS

Paul Maurice left the Winnipeg bench midway through last season, citing a loss of passion. But he's got the fire back, and that's good news for Florida

BY KEN CAMPBELL

YOU RECEIVE AN assignment to write a profile on Paul Maurice for an issue that is themed "Meet The New Guys," and you chuckle to yourself a little, only because it's hilarious on about 17 different levels. In spite of the photos of Maurice on his hockeydb.com and hockey-reference.com pages, which look as though they were taken just after his 12th birthday party, he ain't fooling anybody. If you add up the games Maurice has coached only for the Hartford Whalers/Carolina Hurricanes franchise, he's still 37th on the all-time list, ahead of luminaries such as Toe Blake, Punch Imlach, Jon Cooper and Mike Sullivan. You remember covering the OHL when he coached there. Oh gawd, then you remember that you covered it when he *played* there for the Windsor Spitfires. Gulp. "That's like 38 years ago, my first year junior," he said. "That's f---in' crazy."

The hair is a little thinner, and the glasses are now a permanent fixture, but Maurice looks pretty good for a guy who can wangle a seniors' discount at some pharmacies these days. No real evidence of a dad bod yet, and the face is surprisingly unwrinkled for a guy who is due to become just the fourth man in history to coach 1,700 NHL games when his Florida Panthers face the Washington Capitals at home on Nov. 15. But the days of him being mistaken for Teemu Selanne, as he was at the All-Star Game festivities one year when a veteran broadcaster approached Maurice's parents and told them in very slow and broken English that their son played good hockey, yeah, those days are long gone. He's

MAURICE

DAVID BERDING-USA TODAY SPORTS

LOOKING TO WIN
Maurice ranks near the top in all-time games coached, but he's still chasing his first Stanley Cup.

coached more games than any other current NHL bench boss, but his birthdate of Jan. 30, 1967, puts him 13th among coaches in terms of the number of journeys around the sun.

In fact, Maurice isn't even among the oldest coaches who are new hires in the NHL for this season. When the puck drops on the 2022-23 campaign, there will be 10 teams with new coaches behind their benches. And while the overall age of them is skewed by a 67-year-old Rick Bowness in Winnipeg and a 64-year-old John Tortorella in Philadelphia, the average age of the new hires is just a few days more than 57 years old, which says something about how this league tends to recycle coaches. Lane Lambert is more than two years older than Maurice, and he has yet to coach a single NHL game.

So when you put it all together – five-and-a-half seasons as an assistant in the OHL, a job he took at the age of 21 after having a slapshot crush his right eye in junior hockey, two years as an OHL head coach, 24 seasons in the NHL punctuated by a season in the minors and another in the KHL – Maurice has enough experience to fill a couple of coaching resumes. And when you've coached that long, you get to know yourself pretty well. Maurice knew without a shadow of a doubt early last season that it was time to step away from the Winnipeg Jets after eight-plus years there. And the more he spoke with Panthers GM Bill Zito during the interview process in the off-season, the more Maurice knew it was time for him to come back. So for the next three seasons – or fewer, because even Maurice acknowledges all coaches have a shelf life – Maurice and the Panthers will be trying to accomplish the same thing: to win their first Stanley Cup.

"I was driving to the rink today, and you can feel the season coming, so you get that excitement that comes with it," said Maurice in mid-August. "And I'm thinking, 'Man, I've been doing this a while.' And it doesn't change."

Until it does. And it did last season for Maurice. Beaten down a little by the pandemic and the fortunes of the slumping Jets, for the first time in his career, Maurice lost his passion for the game. And when you love the game as much as he does, that's a big deal. So he left on his terms, resigning from the Jets 29 games into last season. "My performance wasn't acceptable to me," Maurice said. "And the bigger piece to that was, and I don't know if it was COVID, but it was really affecting me. Knowing my performance wasn't where it needed to be, I found that very difficult. For the organization and for me, it just needed to happen."

He resisted the offers to work in TV and instead sat himself in front of one, watching a lot of NHL games, coincidentally a good number of them featuring the Panthers. But it wasn't until Zito called him over the summer and had a series of interviews with him – one of them lasting about 10 hours – that Maurice realized the fire still burned within. And the opportunity to take over a program that is this good, this close to accomplishing something special, and the chance to work with someone with whom he shares a fair bit of simpatico in Zito, was too difficult to turn down. An added bonus is that his son Luke begins law school at the University of Miami in the fall.

It's interesting because before Zito reached out to Maurice, the two of them didn't know each other at all. They had never spoken, never interacted, because Zito's days as a player agent and an assistant GM in Columbus never intersected with Maurice's as an NHL coach. When that happens, with the hockey world being as small a place as it is, you tap into your sources to get more information on the guy, but nothing connects two people – especially two people who are as smart and erudite as Maurice and Zito – like meeting face-to-face. And the more they talked, the more Maurice knew that Florida was going to be a good situation. Because, duh, the team is pretty good for starters, but it was more than that. The two of them talked and talked (and talked) almost exclusively about hockey. Zito said at one point, they even discussed the merits of practising at night instead of in the morning. They didn't discuss it for very long, but it was one of their topics.

"I wanted to go to a place where I thought I could get better, where I thought I could become a better coach," Maurice said. "He asked me a whole lot of questions that made me think differently about why we do

TERRENCE LEE-USA TODAY SPORTS

BENCH TIMEOUT

Maurice stepped down in Winnipeg after losing his love for the game. The good news? It's back.

MAURICE

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> “I WANTED TO GO TO A PLACE WHERE I THOUGHT I COULD GET BETTER, **WHERE I THOUGHT I COULD BECOME A BETTER COACH** – Paul Maurice

things a certain way. I wouldn’t say those meetings rekindled a flame, but I would say they kind of started a fire in a different direction for me. My feeling is that Bill has an energy level that will make me a better coach. And I think this situation will make me a better coach. I want to feel like I’m helping, that I’m moving a program forward.”

It was much the same for Zito, who is entering his third season as the Panthers GM and is already on his third head coach. The forced resignation of Joel Quenneville was way beyond his pay grade, but the appointment and subsequent decision to move on from Andrew Brunette, who could not get the Panthers out of the second round of the playoffs after they had won the Presidents’ Trophy, well, that one is on his record. A former bat boy for the Milwaukee Brewers, Zito has displayed a penchant for swinging for the fences when he executes his transactions. He made bold, decisive blockbuster trades at both of his trade deadlines and didn’t flinch this past off-season when Matthew Tkachuk became available, giving up franchise icon Jonathan Huberdeau and defenseman MacKenzie Weegar, along with prospect Cole Schwindt and a conditional first-round pick in 2025. So it should come as no surprise that Zito went big when he decided Brunette was not the man to coach the Panthers going forward. Under Zito, the Panthers didn’t have a draft pick until 93rd overall in 2022 and aren’t slated to pick in the first round in the next three drafts. We don’t know how all this is going to turn out, but we’re totally here for the excitement Zito has created.

“I didn’t know him, and my staff didn’t know him, and when I spoke to Paul, it was like this explosion of ‘Wow!’ ” Zito said. “The connections…the intellect, the enthusiasm, the EQ (emotional intelligence), the IQ, all these things came together. Paul has, in my mind, the ability to not only implement a system and teach it but to have flexibility, and to play chess as a coach and instill it in the players.”

Communication has never been an issue with Maurice. Not with his players, his employers or members of the media. And the playing-chess part, well, that’s where Maurice might have his biggest impact. There were a lot of years with the Hurricanes when Maurice had to coax an effort out of players and play a system where less-than-star players could compete. When the Hurricanes faced the Detroit Red Wings in the Stanley Cup final in 2002, Detroit’s starting line earned more money than Maurice’s entire roster combined. That will not be a problem in South Florida, where the Panthers spent much of the off-season on the wrong side of the salary cap. Offense will be the least of the Panthers’ worries, since they play at a high pace and have a ton of skill, but you get the sense that they’re one Aaron Ekblad injury away from being in some pretty significant trouble in their own end.

What the Panthers can realistically hope for is for Ekblad to stay healthy and anchor the blueline, likely with

Gustav Forsling as his defense partner. Perhaps Brandon Montour becomes a top-four defenseman, possibly alongside Lucas Carlsson, with Radko Gudas and Marc Staal rounding out the third pairing. Is it an ideal D-corps? No, but try to find a roster in the entire NHL these days that doesn't have a flaw. Or perhaps one of the Panthers' young forwards overperforms and turns into an asset to be moved for a top-four defenseman at the trade deadline. It's not exactly a house of cards on the blueline, but it is a defense corps that's a little vulnerable. And that's where Maurice's systems come into clearer focus.

"You don't want to put mud tires on a Ferrari," Maurice said, "but at the same time, we've got to learn how to drive in the rain here a little bit. It's an acceptance of how hard the other half of the game has to be played. So when you've been in the playoffs and you hit a team whose sole purpose is not letting you score, you have a place to go. Some of the changes on the blueline, in some ways, we'll have to look at that as an advantage, because in order to have success, we're going to have to tighten up a number of the defensive parts of our game. We were going to have to learn how to do that anyway."

STAN SZETO-USA TODAY SPORTS

Maurice wasn't specifically referencing last season when the Panthers scored three goals against the Tampa Bay Lightning in their four playoff losses. But in reality, the Panthers' rival to the northwest has provided them with a perfect template. As coach Jon Cooper often says, the Lightning truly didn't become a serious Cup contender until they stopped being The Greatest Show On Ice™ and began to devote as much of their efforts and resources to playing defense as they did offense. It's right there for the Panthers to copy, and Zito and the organization are betting that Maurice is the man to be able to do it. "We have to figure out a way through speed, skill and certainly through puck possession to be able to win a game 1-0."

> **“YOU DON'T WANT TO PUT MUD TIRES ON A FERRARI, BUT AT THE SAME TIME, WE'VE GOT TO LEARN HOW TO DRIVE IN THE RAIN HERE A LITTLE BIT** – Paul Maurice

Speaking of the Stanley Cup, when you type Maurice's name into Google and get to the part where there are a series of questions, one of them is, "How many Cups has Paul Maurice won?" And when you click on that, you get the following: "Maurice has been an NHL head coach for the better part of 30 years, and has yet to win a Stanley Cup." Well, OK Google, if you want to be that way about it. First, it's only 24 years. Second, winning championships is really, really hard. Just ask Lindy Ruff, who enters this season only 53 games behind Maurice and still hasn't won. Or Maurice's good friend Peter DeBoer, who has made it to two Stanley Cup finals but hasn't won yet. Pat Quinn is in the Hall of Fame and coached exactly 1,400 games without ever tasting championship victory. On the management side, David Poile has gone 38 years as a GM without ever touching the Stanley Cup.

Maurice is undoubtedly chasing a Stanley Cup at this point in his career. But that doesn't necessarily have to bring up a negative connotation. Corey Perry has spent the past few seasons going from team to team trying to win another one, and he's hailed as the ultimate competitor. Legacies matter. They won't define Maurice completely, but it would certainly represent an enormous box checked off his career bucket list. But none of this happens, Maurice said, if he doesn't continue to try to become a better coach. You do that and the Cups tend to take care of themselves. "Winning a Stanley Cup will be a big part of it, that's the truth for sure," Maurice said. "We got to the final (with Carolina in 2002), and with the Jets, we were in the conference final, and we were in that grouping, and then other than that, our challenge a lot of my years was, 'Can this team make the playoffs?' But I still went to the rink thinking we could win the Stanley Cup. It hasn't happened…I want to win one, for sure."

Whether he does or not will be intriguing to watch. The Panthers' window for a championship is wide open at the moment, but it's remarkable how quickly these things can change. There is no doubt that Maurice was brought in to be a difference-maker for the Panthers. And the Panthers might be a difference-maker for Maurice. To be sure, he has never coached a team as talented as the one he'll guide this season. "I don't think I've ever walked off a bench where we've lost a game and I thought it was the players' fault," Maurice said. "Every time, I've thought, 'I missed something. There was a button I didn't push, there was an emotional level I didn't get them to.' And that wouldn't matter even going back to those days where your payroll was $50 million less than other teams. There's still a way, there's always a way to win. And that puzzle is probably the reason why you keep coming back." H

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JAMES CAREY LAUDER-USA TODAY SPORTS

THE ROAD TO FLORIDA

Maurice's coaching career at the pro level has seen plenty of stops

YEAR	TEAM	LEAGUE	GAMES	RECORD	PTS%
1995-96	Hartford	NHL	70	29-33-8	.471
1996-97	Hartford	NHL	82	32-39-11	.457
1997-98	Carolina	NHL	82	33-41-8	.451
1998-99	Carolina	NHL	82	34-30-18	.524
1999-00	Carolina	NHL	82	37-35-10	.512
2000-01	Carolina	NHL	82	38-32-12	.537
2001-02	Carolina	NHL	82	35-26-21	.555
2002-03	Carolina	NHL	82	22-43-17	.372
2003-04	Carolina	NHL	30	8-12-10	.433
2005-06	Toronto	AHL	80	41-29-10	.575
2006-07	Toronto	NHL	82	40-31-11	.555
2007-08	Toronto	NHL	82	36-35-11	.506
2008-09	Carolina	NHL	57	33-19-5	.623
2009-10	Carolina	NHL	82	35-37-10	.488
2010-11	Carolina	NHL	82	40-31-11	.555
2011-12	Carolina	NHL	25	8-13-4	.400
2012-13	Magnitogorsk	KHL	52	27-13-12	.635
2013-14	Winnipeg	NHL	35	8-12-05	.586
2014-15	Winnipeg	NHL	82	43-26-13	.604
2015-16	Winnipeg	NHL	82	35-39-8	.476
2016-17	Winnipeg	NHL	82	40-35-7	.530
2017-18	Winnipeg	NHL	82	52-20-10	.695
2018-19	Winnipeg	NHL	82	47-30-5	.604
2019-20	Winnipeg	NHL	71	37-28-6	.563
2020-21	Winnipeg	NHL	56	30-23-3	.563
2021-22	Winnipeg	NHL	29	13-11-05	.534

BY THE NUMBERS

1,684

GAMES COACHED

(4th all-time)

775

WINS

(7th all-time)

680

LOSES

(1st all-time)

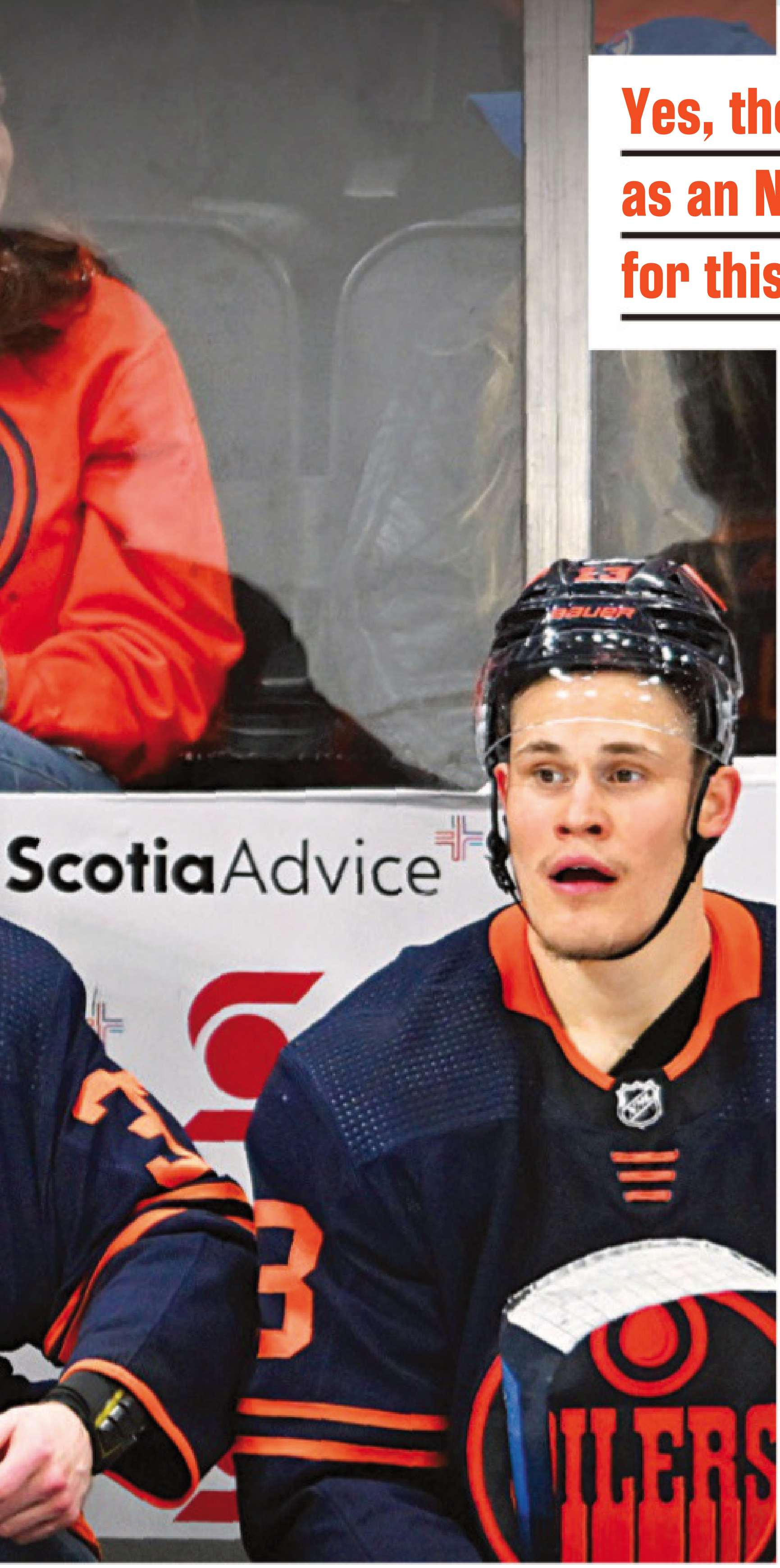
5

NHL COACHING STOPS

(Hartford/Carolina, '95-04, Toronto, '06-08; Carolina, '09-12; Winnipeg, '13-21; Florida, present)

EXPERIE NECESSA

WOODCROFT



NCE

ARY

Yes, the Oilers represent Jay Woodcroft's debut as an NHL head coach, but he's been preparing for this opportunity his whole life

BY TIM WHARNSBY

BEFORE JAY Woodcroft arrived on the Edmonton Oilers' scene as an assistant coach seven years ago, he told people that he attended Detroit Red Wings University and studied for his master's degree at San Jose Sharks State.

That education continued for three years as an Oilers assistant before the opportunity presented itself for Woodcroft to become a first-time head coach with the Oilers' AHL affiliate in Bakersfield, Calif. "When the opportunity came up to run my own bench at the AHL level, I jumped at it because I felt this was the one area of experience I didn't have and that I had to prove myself with," said the 46-year-old Woodcroft. "I had a different path in the NHL. I learned under some of the greatest coaches and had some of the greatest players around in three different organizations."

In his first decade in the NHL, Woodcroft was tutored by Scotty Bowman, Mike Babcock, Todd McLellan, Paul MacLean and Larry Robinson, the latter of whom moved to San Jose for Woodcroft's final three seasons there. The list of players Woodcroft worked with includes Steve Yzerman, Nicklas Lidstrom, Pavel Datsyuk, Henrik Zetterberg, Patrick Marleau, Joe Pavelski, Dan Boyle, Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

When Woodcroft's playing days ended in 2005 (after one season in the German third division with the Stuttgart Wizards), he wanted to join his brothers in the family business – coaching. Todd, four years older, was the Minnesota Wild's video coach and held the same position under Mike Babcock when Canada claimed gold at the 2004 worlds. Todd informed Babcock that Jay, a center who attended the University of Alabama-Huntsville, was interested in coaching. Jay spoke with Babcock, and all of a sudden, he joined the Red Wings' coaching staff.

LEFT: WALTER TYCHNOWICZ-USA TODAY SPORTS; RIGHT: PHOTO BY BAKERSFIELD CONDORS

In Detroit, Woodcroft worked closely with McLellan. When the latter left to become the Sharks' bench boss after the 2007-08 Red Wings won the Stanley Cup, Woodcroft tagged along to become an assistant coach on McLellan's staff. But Woodcroft spent oodles of time taking abundant notes throughout his stops in Detroit, San Jose and Edmonton. He's always been thoughtful and liked to formulate his beliefs in case he became a head coach one day.

So when the Oilers brought in new assistant coaches under McLellan in 2018, Woodcroft took the opportunity to split from his friend and move to Bakersfield. "I've put a lot of time and thought on my coaching philosophy and at the leadership level," Woodcroft said. "It was time."

In three-plus years in Bakersfield, the results were impressive. The Condors put together a 17-game win streak and won the Pacific Division in Woodcroft's rookie season, followed by winning the division playoff in 2020-21. He also sent 16 players to the NHL during his tenure.

When the Oilers’ Ken Holland decided to make his first mid-season coaching change in his 25 years as an NHL GM, he couldn’t ignore Bakersfield was humming again on a 12-1-4 run. So after the Oilers stumbled under coach Dave Tippett with a 7-13-3 slump – after an impressive 16-5-0 start – Holland went with his “gut” and made the bench change Feb. 10.

> I HAD A DIFFERENT PATH IN THE NHL. I LEARNED UNDER SOME OF THE GREATEST COACHES AND HAD SOME OF THE GREATEST PLAYERS AROUND – Jay Woodcroft

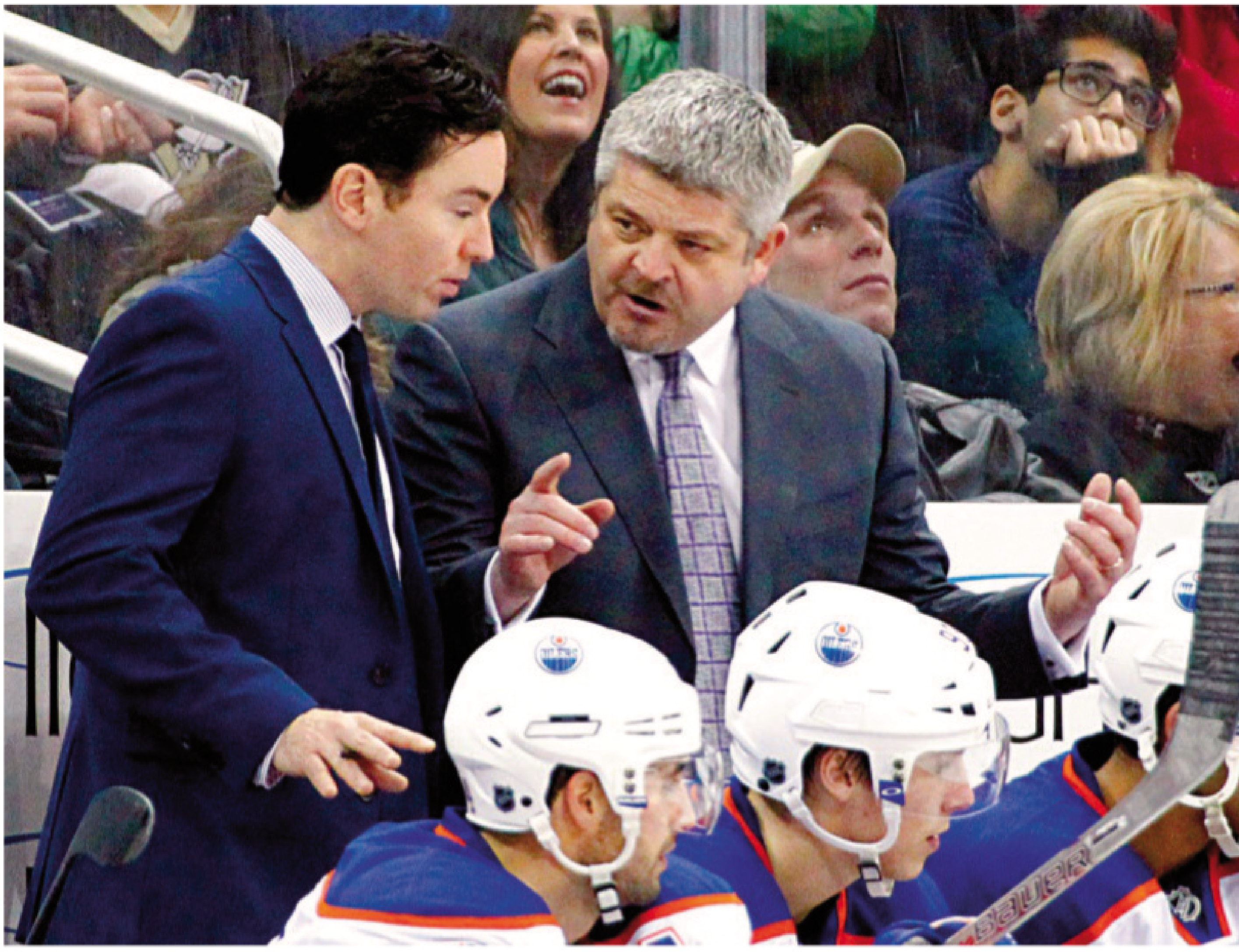
Holland also considered handing the team over to Tippett’s assistant, Glen Gulutzan, but liked what he saw with his experience with Woodcroft in Detroit and later Bakersfield. Woodcroft’s trusty assistant, former Oilers defenseman Dave Manson, was also promoted to Edmonton. The Oilers were out of a playoff spot at the time and had six games in the first 10 days after Woodcroft took over. The Woodcroft-Manson duo made a brilliant first impression, winning their first five games and finishing the regular season on a sound 26-9-3 clip.

Edmonton then dispatched McLellan and the Los Angeles Kings in seven games in the first round and the rival Calgary Flames in five games in Round 2. But the Oilers were swept in the Western Conference final by the eventual Stanley Cup-champion Colorado Avalanche.

The run was a whirlwind four months and has kept Woodcroft busy in the summer. He signed a three-year extension in late June. He added former Winnipeg Jets defenseman Mark Stuart to his staff and prepared for life without future Hall of Fame defenseman Duncan Keith, who decided to retire as he was about to turn 39.

“I felt ready for this opportunity in February based on my preparation over 17 years of professional hockey,” said Woodcroft, who spent part of the summer moving his family to Edmonton. “I felt ready heading into the playoffs since I’ve been a part of a lot of playoff games in different fashions and job titles. You learn different lessons along the way. That first series versus L.A., not all went smooth. There were adverse times. We learned a lot about each other in that series. I thought our habits held up under pressure.

“We worked our way into a second-round series against a heavily favored Calgary Flames team, the No. 1 team in our division. We were able to dispatch them in a timely fashion and learned a lot of lessons about our group. Heading into the third round of the playoffs, it didn’t go our way. I think you can learn as much or more when you don’t achieve what you want. We are learning and processing those lessons.”


CHARLES LECLAIRE-USA TODAY SPORTS

LEARNING THE ROPES
After 13 seasons as NHL video/assistant coach and four years as an AHL head coach, Woodcroft finally got a shot with the Oilers.

The Woodcroft family has quite a legacy and international experience. While Jay enters his first full season leading the Oilers, 50-year-old Todd is in his third season at the helm at the University of Vermont, and the eldest, Craig, embarks on his fifth year running KHL Dinamo Minsk.

Craig, 52, is the most accomplished player among the three Woodcroft brothers. A center, he was a seventh-round Blackhawks draft pick (134th overall) in 1988. After his career at Colgate University and four different stints with the Canadian national team, Craig played for 17 different teams in 12 seasons in Canada, the U.S., Finland, Germany, Italy, England and Sweden. After his playing days, Craig founded a successful hockey-instruction establishment in Minnesota called Northern Edge.

He later enjoyed coaching-staff stints with the Nashville Predators and St. Louis Blues before returning to Europe to help former Red Wings and Boston Bruins coach Dave Lewis run the Belarus national team at three world championships. As a result of his work in Belarus, Craig landed the head-coaching position with Dinamo Minsk. He took a low-budget team to the top third in the 2016-17 standings.

After his time with the expansion Wild, Todd scouted for the Washington Capitals, Minnesota and the Kings, with whom he won a Stanley Cup as a European scout in 2011-12. After that, he moved on to the Calgary Flames as a pro scout and then to the Jets as an assistant coach for four years. Like Jay and Craig, he wanted to be a head coach and departed for Vermont in 2020.

The Woodcroft brothers held a family reunion at the 2015 World Championship in Prague. Jay won gold as an assistant on Canada's staff, while Craig and Todd advanced to the quarterfinals with Belarus and Switzerland.

Todd went on to win gold as an assistant with Sweden in 2017, and he was back with the Tre Kronor as an assistant at the recent summer edition of the world juniors in Edmonton in August.

Hockey is in the brothers' blood. Their father, Frank, was an accomplished junior goaltender, and they also had four hockey-playing and hockey-passionate uncles in Paul, Bud, Gerry and Gord. Paul and Bud were Catholic priests and played for Father Les Costello's colorful Flying Fathers. Costello was a left winger on the 1947-48 Stanley Cup-winning Toronto Maple Leafs and was ordained as a priest in 1957. "The game is so ingrained in all of us," Craig Woodcroft said. "We've been in hockey since we were all toddlers. So the passion for the game has always been there for each of us. The coaching side of the sport has been built up over the course of many, many years, dating back to when we were all teenagers, working summer jobs at hockey schools in Toronto.

"We loved connecting with people, teaching them about something we all loved, and that was playing the game. Over time, our teaching skills, communication skills and leadership skills were honed, and when opportunities arose for each of us to coach in pro hockey, in whatever capacity, we were ready." **H**

> **"I'VE PUT A LOT OF TIME AND THOUGHT ON MY COACHING PHILOSOPHY AND AT THE LEADERSHIP LEVEL. IT WAS TIME** – Jay Woodcroft

RIGHT: JAMES CAREY LAUDER-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: PHOTO BY BAKERSFIELD CONDORS

NHL

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JEAN-YVES AHERN-USA TODAY SPORTS

CAROLINA HURRICANES

HERE COME THE NERVES

Burns filled with excitement and energy as he joins the contending Canes after a decade-plus in San Jose **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

FOR YEARS, DEFENSEMAN Brent Burns would arrive early to away games in Carolina because he wanted to see all the tailgaters grilling and partying outside PNC Arena. Now that he's a member of the Hurricanes, those barbecuers may need to make room for some exotic meats – and maybe even start to think about a Stanley Cup parade route.

Burns, who had spent the past 11 seasons as a mainstay on the San Jose Sharks' blueline, joined Carolina via trade this summer in what was essentially a salary dump for the rebuilding Sharks. Known as much for his enthusiastic personality and *Game of Thrones* beard as he is his top-notch offensive skills on the back end, Burns always seems to be in the middle of delightful chaos. To wit: during his introductory Zoom press conference, he had just arrived at his Texas ranch after a five-day drive from Toronto in an RV that included his family and two 130-pound Leonberger dogs. The RV was towing a truck with a wrecked transmission (the truck had slipped out of neutral during the journey), and Burns' parents were behind them in their own RV. Despite the odyssey, Burns was in his usual form on the call.

"What's exciting for me is the nerves," Burns said. "They create so much energy and excitement, and you kind of get away from that because you're in such a rhythm. Now, it's all going to be brand new. It's a whirlwind and gives you a new perspective on guys who have changed teams. Just a crazy time, the full spectrum of emotions."

As part of his contract, Burns

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DEREK CAIN-USA TODAY SPORTS

had a list of three teams to which the Sharks were allowed to trade him, and although Carolina was not on that list, it didn't take a lot of coaxing for the native of Ajax, Ont., to green-light the trade. Hurricanes GM Don Waddell said the deal came together quickly, as Sharks peer Mike Grier had just become GM at the draft in Montreal. Waddell welcomed Grier to the fraternity, then started asking about Burns. A few days later, Burns was on his way to Carolina with depth forward Lane Pederson in exchange for center Steven Lorentz, AHL goalie Eetu Makiniemi and a conditional third-round pick. San Jose will also pick up one-third of Burns' $8-million cap hit for the final three years of his deal.

For a player who spent more than a decade with San Jose, switching jerseys is going to take some getting used to, and even though Burns had played seven years in Minnesota to start off his NHL career, he's synonymous with the Sharks. Burns acknowledged it's hard to leave the city and its fans, not to mention his teammates.

> I'M COMING TO A TIME WHERE HAVING **A CHANCE TO WIN IT ALL IS ALL THAT MATTERS** – Brent Burns

He had built chemistry with young blueliner Mario Ferraro in recent years, but it was Ferraro who helped assuage the affable Burns' fears about heading into a new dressing room. "He said, 'Burnzie, like *you're* going to have a hard time getting to know guys,' " Burns said. "San Jose was a special place for me for such a long time, and I really grew as a player there. For me, I'm coming to a time where having a chance to win it all is all that matters right now. I've chased the boys in red and black around the ice for a while, and they've got a lot of young guys who are just flourishing."

Though Burns is 37, there wasn't much concern on Carolina's part about his durability, especially since he hasn't missed a game in eight seasons. "Everybody ages differently," Waddell said. "This is a big man that has played a lot of minutes and been very durable throughout his career. We think he's got at least three more real good years in him as he reaches 40."

And let's not forget: Burns is joining a win-now team. Just after he was acquired from San Jose, the Hurricanes swung another sweetheart deal when they got scoring winger Max Pacioretty from cap-strapped Vegas. Then, in August, they made a great value pick-up in 36-year-old free-agent center Paul Stastny.

So an already solid team led by the likes of Sebastian Aho, Jaccob Slavin and Andrei Svechnikov got seasoned stars at both forward and defense. The Sharks won't be vying for a Cup again anytime soon, so Burns gets another crack at a title in Carolina. "That's the reason why we're all in this game," Burns said.

"That's why we're all hitting the squat racks right now, it's not out of pure love for those (exercises). There's an end goal every time we do it. It's no secret this team has been very good the past couple of years, and I'm coming from a team that had those goals as well."

As for the fitness side of things, that has never been a concern with Burns, who has been known to take weights on vacation with him. He played more than 26 minutes a game last year, ranking third in the league and trailing NHL leader Seth Jones by just four seconds a night.

"I never really think about that kind of stuff," Burns said. "I love playing a lot, I love working. One of the reasons I'm still here is a passion to work out and have that fitness level. Don't get me wrong, I love my Tim Hortons and a bag of potato chips, but I've taken pride in getting older and taking care of myself. I see the young guys coming in, they're in incredible shape and have been with trainers for a long time. The days of me going to junior and never lifting a weight are over."

He'll also have a master motivator behind the bench in Rod

MR. DURABILITY
The Canes aren't concerned about Burns turning 38 in March. He hasn't missed a game in eight seasons.

> HE'S GOT AT LEAST THREE MORE REAL GOOD YEARS IN HIM **AS HE REACHES THE AGE OF 40** – GM Don Waddell

Brind'Amour, the Canes coach and legendary fitness beast dating back to his playing days. "I'm probably a little nervous to take my shirt off in front of him until I get dialled in and ready to go there," Burns joked. "We have similarities there, taking pride in that side of the sport, taking care of ourselves. But I would not want to have a push-up contest against him."

As for Pacioretty (who will miss several months due to surgery on a torn Achilles), he's been through the wars in front of the net with Burns over the years and is happy to be on the same side. "There was a lot of animosity between me and Burnzie," Pacioretty said. "But we had a virtual meeting after the trade and talked about the time we really got into it."

Burns even joked to Pacioretty that he could go for the Lady Byng this season, since he won't be trying to cross-check Pacioretty in the face anymore. Of course, he'll have competition from Canes mainstay Slavin, a previous winner of the award and a potential 'D' partner for Burns. Slavin has been one of the best defensive defensemen in the NHL for years and elevated his offensive game on a pairing with the since-departed Tony DeAngelo last season.

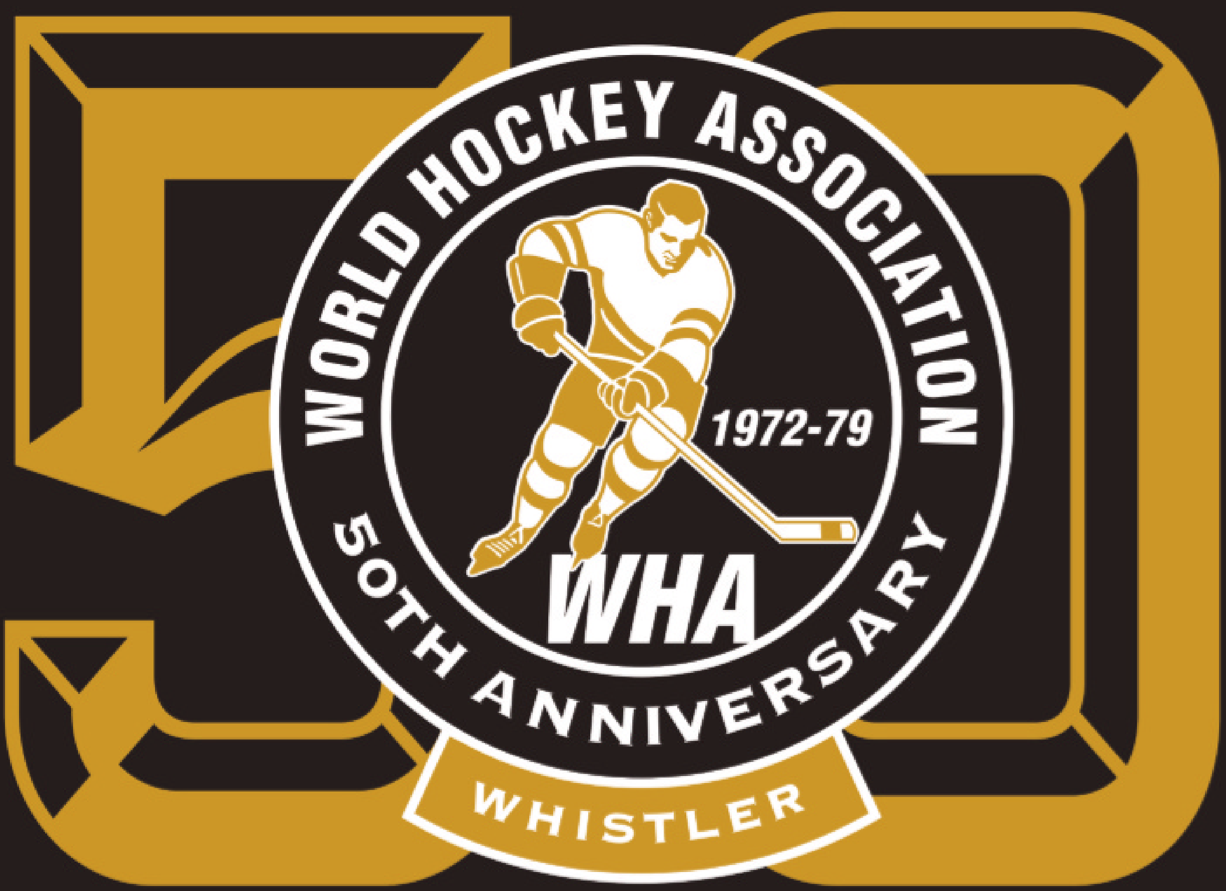
Burns could have a similar effect. "Even just to have that opportunity is something special," Burns said. "He's been a great player for a long time now, and he just makes the game look easy. He's a very smart player, and it would be awesome to play with him."

While the Eastern Conference still goes through Tampa Bay, a changing of the guard could happen as soon as this year. Goalie trouble in the playoffs hurt the Hurricanes last season, but the potential was already there for a run. "This team is so close," Pacioretty said. "In the playoffs, I thought they outplayed the Rangers in that series. Obviously, they had some bad luck and some injuries, but I've been on teams that are close, and you just need to add one or two guys. Burnzie plays huge minutes, so that will help. And people have noted about the power play and scoring goals in the playoffs, and that's where I can help out."

As for the tailgating scene in Carolina, Burns could be another wild card. Though the region is known for pulled pork and whole hog, Burns' Texas ranch features game such as axis deer, which he and his family cook up on the regular. "It's one of our favorite meats," he said. "We harvest a couple every year, and it's one of the animals I try to eat most nights before games and on game days."

Burns also has one mounted on the wall of his house. Perhaps soon he can pop a Stanley Cup ring on the antlers. H

TOP: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: STAN SZETO-USA TODAY SPORTS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BOBBY HULL FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN

PIERRE DORION & **ALEX DEBRINCAT**

GOALS GALORE

DeBrincat knows how to find the twine. He's scored at a 40-goal pace in three of his five NHL seasons.

> I'M HOPING TO BRING SOMEWHAT OF A LEADERSHIP ROLE, **TO PLAY HARD AND GIVE IT MY ALL**
>
> – Alex DeBrincat

OTTAWA SENATORS

LEARNING AND LOVING IT

New team, new city, new member of the family. DeBrincat has a lot to figure out. Luckily, he's excited to do so **BY IAN KENNEDY**

IT'S BEEN 15 YEARS since an Ottawa Senators player scored 40 goals in a season. That was 2007-08, when both Dany Heatley and Daniel Alfredsson hit the mark. With any luck, Sens fans will soon have a new 40-goal man to cheer for in Alex DeBrincat.

DeBrincat, acquired in July for a trio of draft picks, is coming off the second 41-goal season of his NHL career, which also saw the 5-foot-7 right winger notch a career-high 78 points in 82 games.

The Chicago Blackhawks are the only club DeBrincat has known in his NHL career, but now, he'll step into the spotlight with an up-and-coming Senators roster. "Being the new guy is different," DeBrincat said. "I was very comfortable in Chicago and played with some of those guys for quite some time, but it's exciting to go to a new team, and being the new guy is an opportunity to build your game and learn to play with new players. Hopefully, I'm going to embrace that role and contribute as much as possible."

Drafted in the second round (39th overall) in 2016 by Chicago, DeBrincat has always been a scorer. In 2016-17, en route to being named CHL player of the year, he amassed 65 goals and 127 points in just 63 games with the OHL's Erie Otters.

He wasted little time learning to score at the NHL level, and at only 24 years old, DeBrincat is still well within his prime. Having played on an aging and declining Blackhawks roster, DeBrincat now steps into a new opportunity with a team on the rise in Ottawa. It's a situation both DeBrincat and the Senators are excited to get started. In his statement after the trade was announced, Senators GM Pierre Dorion called DeBrincat a "dynamic forward" and "consistent performer and an underrated playmaker."

But it's not enough for DeBrincat simply to score. With a fresh start in a new city, DeBrincat wants to be a leader, and he wants to win now and for years to come. "Chicago is probably going into a rebuild, and Ottawa is coming out of one," DeBrincat said. "I'm excited to be on the right end of that, going in the right direction. We have a lot of young guys that are really good in this league, and hopefully, we can be really good for quite some time. I'm hoping to bring somewhat of a leadership role, to play hard and give it my all every time I'm on the ice."

With a young core in place, Dorion went out and added not only the goal-scoring prowess of DeBrincat but veteran leadership in Claude Giroux and a new goalie in Cam Talbot. "The moves that were made after my trade enhanced the team that much more," DeBrincat said. "Bringing in Talbot and Giroux, combined with the players that were already there, I think it's going to be a lot of fun."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF OTTAWA SENATORS

Like the rest of the other young Senators, DeBrincat has not yet won a Stanley Cup. But he nonetheless brings winning experience to the table – including an OHL championship with Erie in 2017 and representing the United States at multiple international competitions.

DeBrincat has been studying the game since he could first wear skates, waiting and watching for an opportunity to hoist the Stanley Cup. And he hopes that chance will come in Ottawa. "Hockey has been my whole life," he said. "I'm a bit of a hockey nerd, I like to watch a lot of games during the year and talk about it with the guys. I enjoy that part. Hockey is what makes me tick. Obviously, the goal is to make the playoffs and win the Stanley Cup. That's what we're all working for."

ALEX
DEBRINCAT

> I'M A BIT OF A HOCKEY NERD, I LIKE TO WATCH A LOT OF GAMES DURING THE YEAR **AND TALK ABOUT IT WITH THE GUYS. HOCKEY IS WHAT MAKES ME TICK** – Alex DeBrincat

Entering a new and unfamiliar city comes with challenges, however, especially with a newborn at home. DeBrincat and his wife, Lyndsey, welcomed their first child, a son named Archie, to the world in May.

But whether it's on the ice or at home, facing a new situation and rising to the challenge has always been part of DeBrincat's nature. "Our son is a big part of our life" he said. "We're having fun with that and learning a lot. On the ice, I'm always interested in learning new things as well, seeing the way people play, and trying to bring them into my game. I haven't been to Ottawa that much, but I'm excited to explore the city and to be a part of what's next. Coming to a new team is different, but I'm excited for the challenge." H

ATLANTIC DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

Almost three years after **JIM MONTGOMERY** was fired by the Dallas Stars for "unprofessional conduct," the Bruins took a chance on a good coach who owned his mistakes. Shortly after his firing, Montgomery went into rehab for alcoholism and has rebuilt both his personal and professional lives, spending the past two seasons as an assistant coach for the St. Louis Blues. "I think anybody can achieve things in life if you're willing to accept change and make change," said Montgomery in his introductory conference in July.

On a blueline neither experienced nor physical, **ILYA LYUBUSHKIN** brings both elements to the Sabres. At 28, he's by far the oldest D-man that Buffalo will dress, and even though he's not the team's biggest defenseman, he'll be the one most willing to initiate contact, something he has done in four seasons with Arizona and Toronto. And he'll be happy to be on the Sabres' side of the ice. "When I played in Arizona, it was always the same," said Lyubushkin of facing Buffalo. "I feel like, 'Oh my god, it's so hard game.' "

One of the reasons GM Steve Yzerman received rave reviews this summer was his acquisition of **DAVID PERRON**, who figures to play the right side of the second line with the newly acquired Andrew Copp at center and Jakub Vrana on the left. Perron seemed destined to retire with St. Louis, and it'll take some getting used to seeing him play for a rival. He was disappointed the Blues didn't make him an offer, but he now goes to a team building toward respectability. The Wings will rely on his offense and leadership.

The way Panthers GM Bill Zito figured, when you have a chance to get a dominant player in his prime, you do it, even if it costs you dearly. That price was Jonathan Huberdeau, but in trading for and then signing **MATTHEW TKACHUK**, Florida gets a player coming off a 42-goal, 104-point season, with the possibility of even more to come. Tkachuk also adds a physical element that teams need in the playoffs, and he has the personality to embrace the task of helping to continue to elevate the sunbelt franchise.

In **MIKE MATHESON**, the Canadiens get a player they (or at least their GM) know well. Matheson was a Kent Hughes client when the latter was an agent, before Hughes took the Habs' GM job. In fact, Hughes negotiated the eight-year, $39-million deal Matheson signed with Florida, which has four years left. Matheson, coming off career highs in goals, assists and points, will be relied on to be a leader on 'D.' His ability to produce from the blueline should play well in coach Martin St-Louis' more creative and offensive style.

After so many years solely about the future, Ottawa showed with its off-season moves that it wants to compete in the present. That was no more evident than when the club dealt Filip Gustavsson, 24, to Minnesota for **CAM TALBOT**, 35. Talbot, who has one year left on his deal, was one of the NHL's hottest goalies last season prior to the Wild acquiring Marc-Andre Fleury. Talbot is being looked upon as the answer in a crease that has been pockmarked by inconsistency and subpar play for the past couple years.

IAN COLE is an owner of two Stanley Cup rings, and his choice to sign for one year and $3 million is an indication he wants at least one more. His experience means he will fit in perfectly in the Lightning dressing room. He brings experience and bite to a blueline that lost both those elements when Ryan McDonagh was traded and Jan Rutta was lost to free agency. Cole figures to be a third-pairing 'D' on the left side. "We wanted someone who can kill penalties, bring that size, bring that physicality," said GM Julien BriseBois.

CALLE JARNKROK had just one goal in 29 games for Calgary last season, but that didn't deter Toronto from signing the 31-year-old right winger to a four-year, $8.4-million deal. After all, the Leafs have enough forwards who score, but when they lost Ilya Mikheyev to free agency, they needed someone who could plug the hole on their third line. And Jarnkrok does have some offensive pedigree, meaning he could move up the lineup if needed. Prior to being traded at the deadline, Jarnkrok was fairly productive for Seattle.

BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS

CONFERENCE CONVERSION
This will be Kuemper's first Eastern home after stops in Minnesota, Los Angeles, Arizona and Colorado.

WASHINGTON CAPITALS

NO REST FOR WICKED TALENT

Kuemper is becoming accustomed to success, and that should continue in Washington's all-new crease duo **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

LESS THAN THREE MONTHS after reaching the pinnacle of his professional career, Darcy Kuemper is embarking on a new adventure.

On June 26, the 32-year-old hoisted the Stanley Cup above his head for the first time, just under 11 months after the Colorado Avalanche acquired him in a trade with the Arizona Coyotes. Seventeen days later, Kuemper was on the move again. He inked the NHL's most lucrative goalie contract of the summer, signing a five-year deal with the Washington Capitals at an annual cap hit of $5.25 million. "I just really like the roster," said Kuemper of choosing Washington. "Obviously, it's a team that's won before, and it's a veteran group that knows how to win. That's what I was looking for, another chance to go win. I think this is a place where we can do that."

Winning is getting to be a habit. Kuemper also closed out his 2020-21 season on a high note, with a gold medal in Riga, Latvia, as the starting goalie for Team Canada at the World Championship. It's been an impressive rise for the 2009 sixth-round pick – an under-the-radar talent who didn't become a starter until 28, when he played 55 games for the Coyotes. And Kuemper didn't truly step into a bright NHL spotlight until joining the Avalanche in 2021-22.

"There's not a lot that you would pick apart about his game," said Kevin Woodley of *InGoal Magazine*. "And there's not a lot that jumps off the page as being like, 'The next generation of goalies should model themselves after this.' And that's not a criticism. He just does everything really well."

The Capitals are seeking a fresh start in the crease. In the off-season, the Caps traded Vitek Vanecek to the New Jersey Devils, and, wary of a potentially budget-busting arbitration ruling, also chose not to issue a qualifying offer to 2015 first-round pick Ilya Samsonov. "The plan was to get a No. 1 that we really liked and felt comfortable with," said Capitals GM Brian MacLellan. "I think (Kuemper) is a good goalie. Seems like a good person, good character, a good team guy. And I think it's exactly what we needed to go into next year."

In Washington, Kuemper has a chance to lead a formidable tandem with Charlie Lindgren, who signed a three-year free-agent deal at a cap hit of $1.1 million per season. In 2021-22, the 28-year-old Lindgren put up sparkling AHL numbers and went 5-0-0 with the St. Louis Blues, with a .958 save percentage and 1.22 goals-against average. "I do believe that Lindgren took a major step last year," Woodley said. "We could look back in a year or two years and see the Lindgren signing as one of the steals of this year's free-agency class. His underlying statistical profile, combined with his evolution and the steps he took, I don't think last year was a fluke."

A strong partnership could help in Kuemper's adjustment to his new team. In Colorado last season, he posted a pedestrian .903 SP in his first 15 games before dialling up to .927 in 42 games over the rest of the year. All five of his shutouts came after Dec. 1, as he amassed a record of 28-7-4.

Kuemper will face even greater challenges settling into Washington than he did last year in Denver. He's coming off the shortest off-season of his career – he was still wearing an Avalanche championship T-shirt as he celebrated his day with the Stanley Cup in his hometown of Saskatoon on Aug. 5. Barely three weeks later, he was on the road with his wife, Sydney, and his all-black German Shepherd, Rogue, for the 2,000-mile trek to Washington, where he'll suit up for an Eastern Conference team for the first time in his 10-year NHL career. "If he's a guy who leans a little more heavily on reads, they all just changed, right?" Woodley said. "He's been around long enough to have seen (Eastern Conference shooters) at some point, but the level of familiarity he had in his old division and in the Western Conference won't be the same. Some of the individual player tendencies and power-play tendencies, I can see that contributing to a slower than expected start. Patience probably will be important out of the gate."

Over the longer term, Woodley believes the Capitals will foster an environment in which Kuemper can succeed. "Assuming (coach Peter) Laviolette keeps their attention defensively for another year, they're a really good environment for goalies," he said.

Woodley believes when Kuemper's on his game, he's among the best in the league. "If you take his second half and extrapolate it over a full season, you can make the argument that he should be in the Vezina discussion, at least in the top five." H

DARCY
KUEMPER

WALTER TYCHNOWICZ-USA TODAY SPORTS

> IF YOU TAKE HIS SECOND HALF AND EXTRAPOLATE IT OVER A FULL SEASON, **YOU CAN MAKE THE ARGUMENT HE SHOULD BE IN THE VEZINA DISCUSSION** – Kevin Woodley, *InGoal Magazine*

NHL EASTERN CONFERENCE

METRO DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

When you already have Sebastian Aho and Jordan Staal at center, you're looking pretty good down the middle. But, with Vincent Trocheck gone, a solid No. 2 was needed to really cement things, and in the end, the answer was **PAUL STASTNY**. The crafty playmaker has proven to be a consistent producer and even broke 20 goals with Winnipeg last season. Stastny, 36, plays hard and will allow Jesperi Kotkaniemi flexibility to either play on the wing or on a bottom-six line as the youngster finds his way.

OK, so the biggest name going from Calgary to Columbus was obviously Johnny Gaudreau – but he wasn't the first. That would be D-man **ERIK GUDBRANSON**, who truly had a turnaround year with the Flames and now takes his talents to mid-Ohio. Gudbranson is a known leader who can be an effective, physical defender when he keeps things simple. After struggling for four teams over two previous seasons, he was solid for Calgary, and there were rumblings he was a reason Gaudreau chose Columbus.

As the Devils continue their rebuild, the time to fold in seasoned pros with the youth has come. Getting a two-time Stanley Cup champion and all-out playoff wonder in **ONDREJ PALAT** was a master stroke. The erstwhile Tampa Bay winger is the kind of glue guy who brings a line together, and even though the Bolts fell short of a three-peat, Palat was awesome in the playoffs, with 21 points in 23 games – only Nikita Kucherov had more for the team. Pair Palat with Nico Hischier or Jack Hughes and you've got fun.

While the Isles have an emerging star in Noah Dobson, they've missed Devon Toews' mobility since trading Toews to the Avs. **ALEXANDER ROMANOV**, who was acquired from Montreal in a draft-day trade that sent an already-wild Bell Centre into fits, could help New York's offense and transition game. Romanov is a big hitter who skates well and loves to compete. While he hasn't found much NHL production yet in 133 career games, it's a focal point for the youngster, and playing with Dobson won't hurt.

The Rangers are just finishing a puzzle that New York fans hope will turn into a title, and perhaps **VINCENT TROCHECK** is one of those final pieces. The 29-year-old two-way center replaces Ryan Strome (now with Anaheim) down the middle and comes from a strong Carolina team the Rangers could see again in the playoffs. Trocheck had a solid playoffs with the Canes and can fit perfectly on the depth chart behind No. 1 center Mika Zibanejad and hopefully find chemistry with Artemi Panarin.

TONY DEANGELO kept his mouth shut and let his play do the talking in Carolina last year, and the result was impressive as he became a key contributor. Now the 26-year-old offensive blueliner comes home to Philadelphia, having grown up just across the Delaware River in South Jersey. For a Flyers team that still doesn't have a clear picture of Ryan Ellis' health status, DeAngelo can be that puck-moving, power-play QB the team needs. Philly finished dead-last with the man advantage last season.

While **JEFF PETRY** had a rough go of things in Montreal last season, it's worth remembering the Habs in general were a nightmare. We've seen what the 34-year-old defenseman can do when he's surrounded by talent, and he'll have a much better chance to do that in Pittsburgh, where he joins a blueline led by Kris Letang. Petry is the kind of two-way pro who does so many things the right way, and for a Penguins team still gunning for another title, he is very much in win-now mode.

With Nicklas Backstrom potentially out for the season due to hip surgery, the Caps needed someone to shore up a scoring line. Center **DYLAN STROME** will get an opportunity to do that. Strome, surprisingly allowed to walk as an RFA by Chicago, put up soild numbers for the rebuilding Hawks while playing with Patrick Kane and Alex DeBrincat – so he knows how to play with talent. Washington has wingers who can cash in with the big playmaker, and it'll be interesting to see the line combos.

TRIBUTE TO DAD
Marchment will wear No. 27 in Dallas, the same number his late father, Bryan, wore for much of his career.

DALLAS STARS

JUST KEEP MARCHING ON

Despite being overlooked for most of his career, Marchment has no time for bitterness – only for gratitude **BY MIKE STEPHENS**

MASON MARCHMENT IS not a petty person.

He has every right to be, really, after going undrafted in consecutive years (2013 and 2014) as an NHL prospect. He couldn't be blamed for playing with a chip on his shoulder these days, hoping to stick it to those responsible for the scouting reports deeming him unworthy of an NHL shot that followed him around early in his career.

But that's just not who he is. "Look, there's definitely some people I want to prove wrong," said Marchment with a laugh. "There were a lot of doubters. That's for sure. But, honestly, I don't think about it too much. I think I'd just classify myself as a gamer. I'm just a really competitive person."

Marchment has now earned his shot and then some. The 27-year-old is coming off the best season of his young career, establishing himself as a force to be reckoned with at hockey's highest level while scoring nearly a point per game for the Florida Panthers en route to the club winning the Presidents' Trophy.

His success materialized this summer into a four-year, $18-million pact with the Dallas Stars. Sadly, his moment of triumph came on the heels of tragedy. The deal was signed July 13, one week after the sudden passing of his father, former NHL defenseman Bryan. In August, the Stars said Marchment would wear No. 27 this season in a tribute to his father.

Marchment has come a long way since being plucked off the free-agent heap as an undrafted CHL overager in 2016. Signed to an AHL contract by the Toronto Marlies, he began his journey in pro hockey a long way from the NHL. He was first required to prove his ability with ECHL Orlando in 2016-17 before earning a promotion to the AHL later that season.

But the progress he showed was as much about his work off the ice as anything on it, especially working with skating guru Barb Underhill. "The first year, I basically just worked out and power skated," Marchment said. "All of it was with Barb Underhill. You know, I even had a session with her today. Without a doubt, she's one of the reasons why I'm in the NHL today. For sure. She's helped my skating, like, bar none."

Few thought it was possible, but Marchment eventually made it up those rungs to the NHL, debuting with the Leafs in 2020. But his personal victory was short-lived, as he was abruptly sent packing in February, heading to the Panthers after just four big-league games in exchange for the younger but more established Denis Malgin.

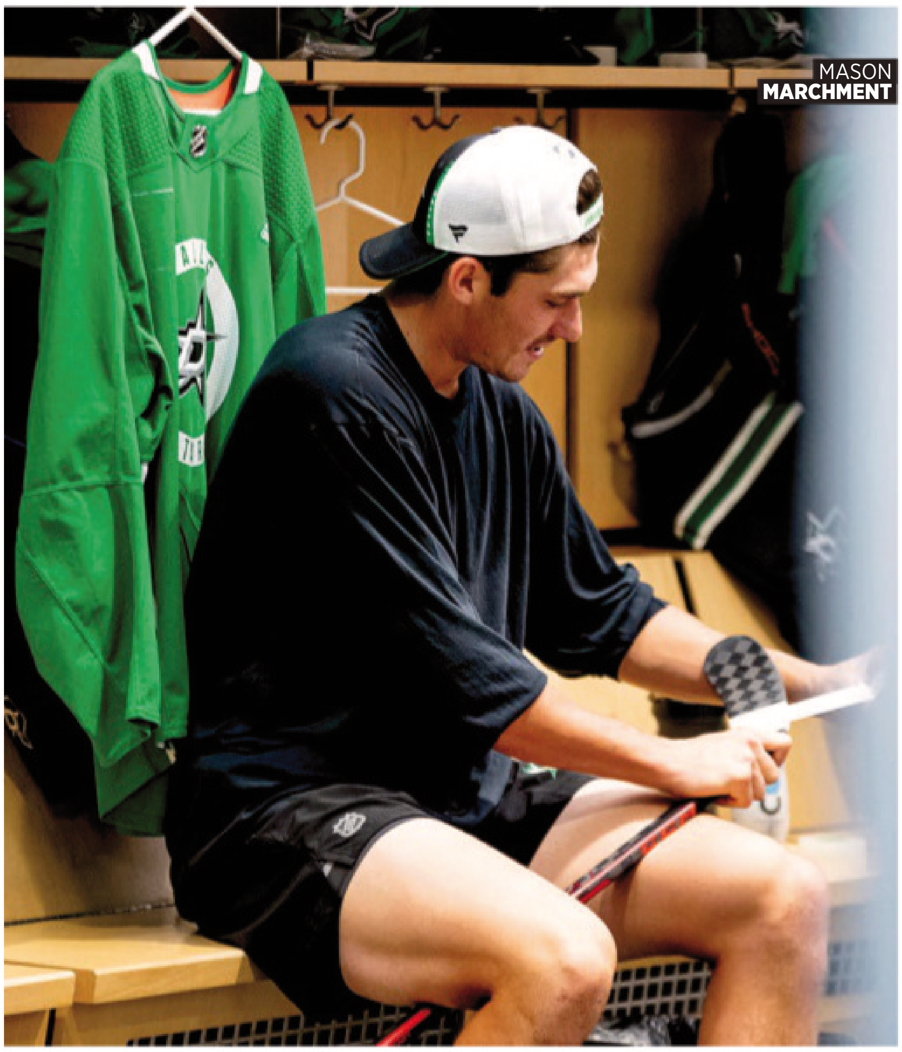
If Marchment were a petty person, he'd probably point to how poorly that trade worked out for Toronto in the years since. But, once again, that's not who he is. Marchment instead credits his short stint with the Leafs for giving him the confidence to know he belonged in the NHL. "It wasn't a big sample size or big minutes or anything like that," he said. "But I think just going up there and playing and knowing I could play with those guys brought a lot of confidence to me, and especially because of where I came from. And after getting traded, I just felt like I was ready."

As he'd done at every level, Marchment was ready to defy expectations. All he needed was an opportunity. A real one.

PHOTOS BY DALLAS STARS

That finally came in Florida, when then-Panthers coach Joel Quenneville plucked Marchment from the fourth line early in 2021 and put him on the team's top unit with Aleksander Barkov and Carter Verhaeghe.

The Panthers won five of their next six games following the switch, with Marchment proving himself as a capable top-six forward. “I definitely wouldn't be here without the development I received in Toronto,” he said. “But Florida is where I first got that opportunity. And I just ran with it.”



> THERE WERE A LOT OF DOUBTERS. THAT'S FOR SURE. **BUT I DON'T THINK ABOUT IT TOO MUCH** – Mason Marchment

The rest is history. Marchment became a key member of the Panthers' NHL-best offense last season – with 18 goals and 47 points in 54 games – turning heads around the league and arriving in Dallas with a heavier wallet and higher expectations.

His circumstances have changed in the span of a year. And yet, amidst the tumult, Marchment is changing very little in his approach. “I really only take two or three weeks off before I start working out for next season,” he said. “It's been the same this summer, too. I'm working out with (BioSteel co-founder) Matt Nichol, I'm on the ice now four times a week, and I'm putting in a lot of power skating just trying to get better.”

The Stanley Cup is obviously what Marchment has his sights set on. Every player does. But in joining a new organization, Marchment is once again hoping to prove his worth to those who took a chance on him. “I'm hoping to play my game, play heavy,” Marchment said. “I don't want anyone coming to Dallas and thinking it'll be an easy game.”

If his track record is any indication, Marchment will deliver on that promise. H

CENTRAL DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

At one time, Vancouver appeared to have plucked a gem out of college in undrafted rearguard **TROY STECHER**. But the 28-year-old's career has fizzled of late. Injuries have cost him upward of 40 games the past two seasons, and the fits and starts have led to inconsistency. But in Arizona, Stecher will vie for middle-pairing minutes and possibly even power-play time. Opportunity abounds in the desert, which will benefit Stecher, who hungers to get his career back on track and extend his NHL lifespan.

Four seasons ago, **ANDREAS ATHANASIOU** potted 30 goals. In the three seasons since, he has managed only 32 in 130 games. That is largely due to injury, though. The 28-year-old still has natural offensive instincts and speed. Utilized properly and given the chance to go to work on special teams – not to mention possible minutes alongside Patrick Kane – a mid-career resurgence isn't out of the question. On a one-year deal with plenty to prove, it's a low-risk, high-reward gamble for both the team and player.

Darcy Kuemper is out. **ALEXANDAR GEORGIEV** is in. And the expectation in Colorado is clear, particularly after he was inked to a three-year, $10.2-million pact: the Avs want the Georgiev who was stealing time from a late-career Henrik Lundqvist, not the one who has posted a combined .901 save percentage across 52 games the past two seasons. Georgiev, 26, once had clear-No. 1 potential, but he'll have to battle Pavel Francouz for starting minutes. Crease competition is rarely a bad thing.

There is no mistaking **COLIN MILLER** for John Klingberg, but the Stars' aim appears to be deputizing Miller with others, such as Thomas Harley, to replace what was lost when Klingberg exited in free agency. In Miller, 29, Dallas landed a mobile, puck-moving D-man who can either quarterback or play the triggerman on a power-play unit. There's versatility to his game, and given what will be required of him as part of a group led by Miro Heiskanen, Esa Lindell and Ryan Suter, Miller should be able to settle in nicely.

The Wild made the best of a bad situation by swapping Cam Talbot to Ottawa for **FILIP GUSTAVSSON**. Not only does Gustavsson, 24, possess size, natural ability and oodles of potential, he's proven he knows how to win on a big stage. His decorated international career includes top-goaltender honors and silver medals at the U-18 and WJC levels. Further, Gustavsson was once the 88th-ranked prospect in THN's Future Watch issue. There's opportunity for him to blossom under the veteran tutelage of Marc-Andre Fleury.

Talk about a tidy piece of business. In bringing in **NINO NIEDERREITER**, Nashville instantly upgraded its offense and brought aboard a winger with legitimate 30-goal potential, particularly when considering the additional ice time he can earn. Niederreiter was mired in a logjam in Carolina and averaged less than 15 minutes per game last season. If the 30-year-old manages to form a partnership with Mikael Granlund or Ryan Johansen, there's every reason to believe Niederreiter is in line for a career-best output.

THOMAS GREISS has carved out a healthy living as a career second-stringer. Given that's the case, the assumption might be teams know what to expect when the 36-year-old steps between the pipes. However, that isn't quite the case. Instead, Greiss has alternated between world-beater and blue-paint blunderer. Last season, his goals saved above average of minus-0.55 per 60 minutes was the worst among the 48 goalies to play at least 1,500 minutes. But he was also a Jennings Trophy winner four seasons ago.

‘Big Save Dave' sure didn't make many of them last season. His ugly .886 SP and 3.57 GAA were the worst marks of his career. Luckily, the Jets' expectation for **DAVID RITTICH**, 30, isn't that he'll step into the crease for long stretches. Rather, the hope is he can spell the seemingly tireless Connor Hellebuyck, who has played 1,000 more minutes than any other NHL keeper across the past five seasons. That said, Rittich played an important role in propelling the 2019-20 Calgary Flames into the post-season.

ANOTHER LEVEL
Watching his new mates work out this summer has lit a fire for Campbell: "It's really inspiring and contagious."

PHOTOS BY EDMONTON OILERS

EDMONTON OILERS

TECTONIC SHIFT

Campbell would never let something as trivial as a trip to the ECHL – or an earthquake – shake his resolve **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

EDMONTON MAY BE THE NHL's northernmost market, but that doesn't faze the Oilers' new starting goaltender, Jack Campbell.

A stint with the ECHL Idaho Steelheads in 2015-16 took Campbell on a three-game road trip much closer to the North Pole. He was also, memorably, rattled by an earthquake while visiting the Alaska Aces in Anchorage. "We're in the hotel on, like, the 40th floor or whatever floor it was, right around bedtime," the affable stopper said. "It was probably 10 o'clock or something, and there was this pretty good-sized earthquake. We're grabbing our comforter to run down the stairs with it. It was definitely shaking a little bit and pretty sketchy, but no one was hurt, and everything was fine."

Campbell, ever a glass-half-full kind of guy, remembers the trip fondly despite the shaker. "It was awesome," he said. "I probably wouldn't have been there at that age in my life without going down (to the ECHL)."

The former top prospect's path to the NHL was not without peril – even before it took him into an earthquake. Campbell was the first goalie taken in the 2010 draft, 11th overall by the Dallas Stars. But he saw just one NHL game for the organization, spending most of his time in the AHL, plus 27 games over two tours of duty in the ECHL.

Campbell now sees his time in Boise as a turning point in his career. "Obviously, as a competitor, it's very frustrating and not where you want to be," he said. "You want to be moving up and growing that way. But when I got the opportunity to go down, Neil Graham was the coach there. He was fired up to have me, and the boys were really welcoming."

Added Graham, who's now coach for the AHL Texas Stars: "He was stressed and needed immediate feedback for himself to see, 'How can I get better?' "

To ease the pressure, Graham refused to let Campbell watch video of the goals he allowed in his first start with Idaho. "He was completely shocked," Graham said. " 'We have a game Friday, you're starting again. How about we just start preparing for the next game?' He said, 'OK, you're the coach,' and from there, he was exceptional. He grabbed the ball and took it. I think he enjoyed his time, and he was excellent for us, and we were grateful to have an excellent goalie in our net."

Oilers winger Devin Shore also came up through the Stars organization and has seen Campbell's growth. "The person, Jack Campbell, has always been there," Shore said. "I know he's developed himself, deservingly, a reputation for being a happy-go-lucky, hardworking, great teammate. He always has a smile on his face. And that was there when we were together in (the AHL)."

Campbell was later traded to the Los Angeles Kings in 2016, then moved to Toronto in 2020. His career hit a new high this summer when he inked a five-year, $25-million pact with Edmonton when free agency opened July 13. In Edmonton, he will be reunited with Shore and with former Toronto teammates Zach Hyman, Cody Ceci and Tyson Barrie.

On the ice this summer, Campbell joined the group of Oilers who train with Gary Roberts in Aurora, Ont.: Hyman, Shore, Darnell Nurse, Warren Foegele – and Connor McDavid, of course.

“What made me so excited about joining Edmonton is, I know ‘Hymes’ very well: his work ethic and his drive to be the best he can be every day,” Campbell said. “When I talked to him, he told me a lot about Connor. Now, I’m able to see it in person every day, working out with them. It’s really inspiring and contagious and makes me want to be the absolute best I can be. I’ve always worked super hard, but I’m definitely at another level thanks to my teammates here.”

Now 30 and armed with a long-term contract, Campbell is experiencing proper stability for the first time in his career. That’s also true on the home front. This summer, he became engaged to fiancee Ashley Sonnenberg, and in mid-June, Golden Mountain Dog puppy Huey joined the couple’s two cats.

At a time when other American-born players, such as Johnny Gaudreau and Matthew Tkachuk, have left Alberta for opportunities south of the border, Michigan-born Campbell has no qualms about staying in Canada. “I love hockey and being at the rink and being around the guys,” he said. “Nothing to take away from winning the Stanley Cup no matter where you’re playing, but I definitely am super motivated to try to help the group be the first Canadian team in quite a while to win the Stanley Cup. It just kind of drives me every single day.

“And also, that spotlight. It makes you want to be the best player you can possibly be.”

JACK
CAMPBELL

> I DEFINITELY AM SUPER MOTIVATED TO TRY TO HELP THE GROUP BE THE FIRST **CANADIAN TEAM IN QUITE A WHILE TO WIN THE STANLEY CUP** – Jack Campbell

PACIFIC DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

JOHN KLINGBERG’S one-year, $7-million deal rates as one of the more unusual UFA signings of the salary-cap era. Anaheim is going through a rebuild, so it was an unlikely destination for a 30-year-old presumably intent on securing one last big contract, but signing the top-pair rearguard got the Ducks to the salary floor. Klingberg has a full no-trade clause that becomes a 10-team no-trade clause on Jan. 1. So expect him to be a Duck for half a season and then go to a Cup contender around the trade deadline.

It was almost magical the way GM Brad Treliving was able to offset the loss of a 115-point left winger (Johnny Gaudreau) to free agency with another 115-point left winger (**JONATHAN HUBERDEAU**), but it involved a couple of trades and a boatload of conditions. The same eight-year, $84-million pact Gaudreau turned down was signed by Huberdeau. For now, he’s in the final year of a deal that pays him $5.9 million per season. Huberdeau is a different player than Gaudreau and is just a couple of months older.

Cap constraints prevented the Oilers from making big-ticket free-agent moves, although signing Jack Campbell and retaining Evander Kane are wins. **RYAN MURRAY** was an interesting September signing. When 2012 No. 1 overall pick Nail Yakupov failed, armchair experts wondered if they should’ve taken Murray instead. He went No. 2 overall to Columbus. Murray has been a third-pairing defender in nine injury-plagued seasons. The 29-year-old is coming off a Cup win with Colorado, where he was a seventh defenseman.

It’s not often a 25-year-old point-per-game player comes onto the trade market, but the Kings were in a good position to land **KEVIN FIALA**. Cap constraints made it difficult for Minnesota to retain Fiala, coming off a breakthrough 33-goal, 85-point season. The Kings gave up prospect Brock Faber and a first-round draft pick for Fiala, who turned 26 after the trade. L.A. signed him to a seven-year, $55.1-million deal. The Kings have excellent young players, so getting a first-line winger accelerates the rebuild.

The Sharks determined Adin Hill wasn’t going to be their goalie of the future. And with James Reimer turning 35 in March, San Jose knew getting a goalie was a priority. **KAAPO KAHKONEN** dropped to No. 3 in Minnesota when Marc-Andre Fleury joined Cam Talbot at the trade deadline. So the Wild traded Kahkonen to the Sharks for Jacob Middleton. Kahkonen played well in 11 games, and San Jose signed him to a new deal. Technically, Kahkonen isn’t “new,” but his status as the main stopper is a new development.

The Kraken picked up a couple of Killer B’s – **OLIVER BJORKSTRAND** and **ANDRE BURAKOVSKY**. They may join forces on the same line as another Killer B, Matty Beniers, who joined Seattle in April. Burakovsky will receive a Cup ring on his first road trip to Colorado. The 27-year-old left winger spent the past three seasons with the Avs before signing with the Kraken. Right winger Bjorkstrand, 27, was a bargain pickup when Columbus needed to create cap space. Seattle gave up just third- and fourth-round draft picks.

The Canucks picked up uncertainty in the acquisitions of middle-six forwards **ILYA MIKHEYEV** and **ANDREI KUZMENKO**. Speedster Mikheyev was dangerous at times during three years in Toronto. The Leafs couldn’t afford his salary demands, and he signed with Vancouver for a $4.75 AAV. Kuzmenko is coming off the best of his six seasons in the KHL, with 53 points in 45 games. The uncertainty comes in the heights they can reach. Are they capable third-liners, impressive second-liners or breakthrough top-liners?

The first goal **PHIL KESSEL** scores for Vegas will be the 400th of his career. When the 35-year-old records his 44th point this season, it will be his 1,000th in the NHL. And each consecutive game Kessel plays, starting with the opener, will extend his streak as the NHL’s ironman for regular-season and playoff games – north of 1,000 before it eventually ends. That’s what Vegas is getting for just $1.5 million. And don’t let his age fool you; he’s still among the fastest skaters in the NHL, even if his stamina isn’t top-notch.

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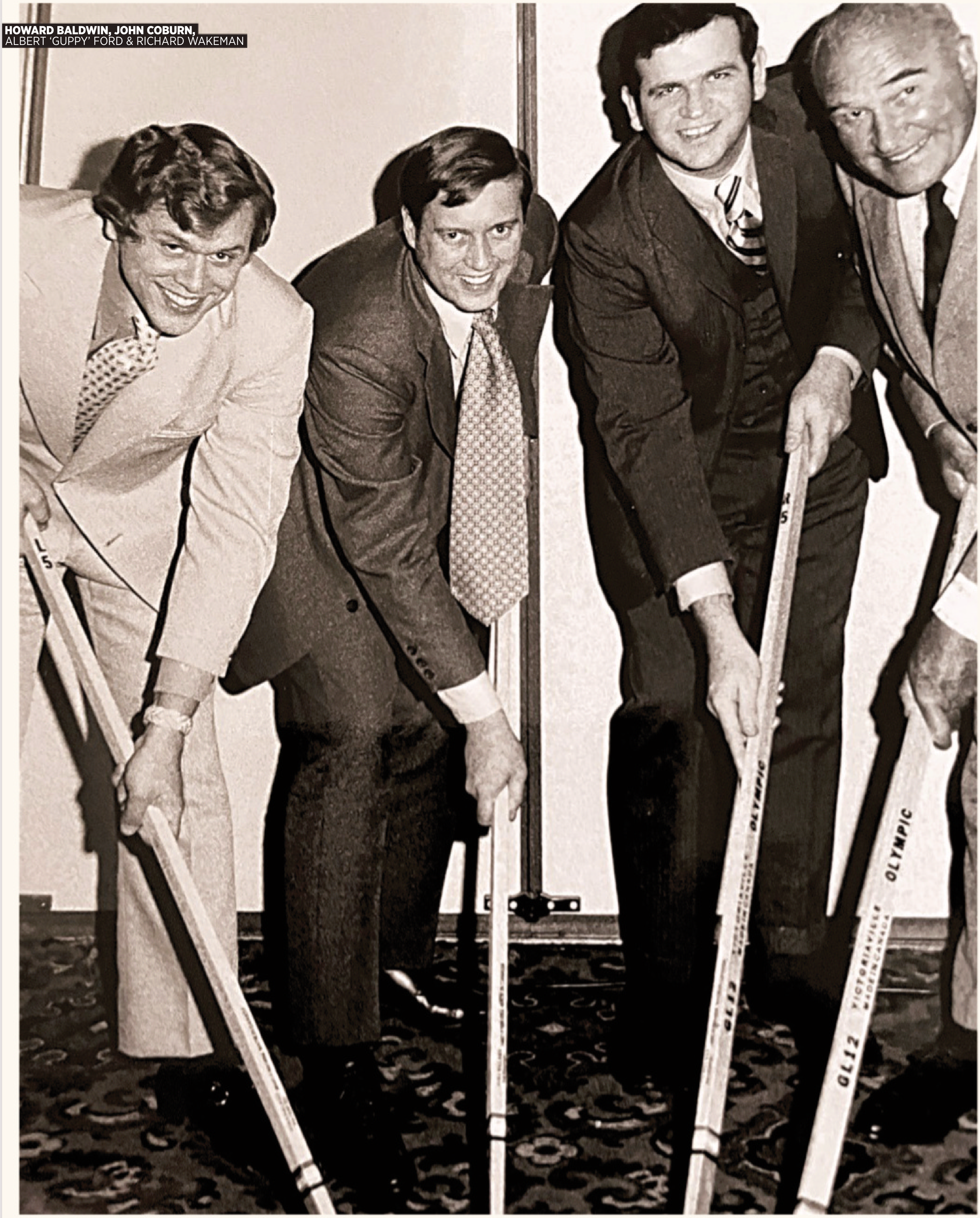
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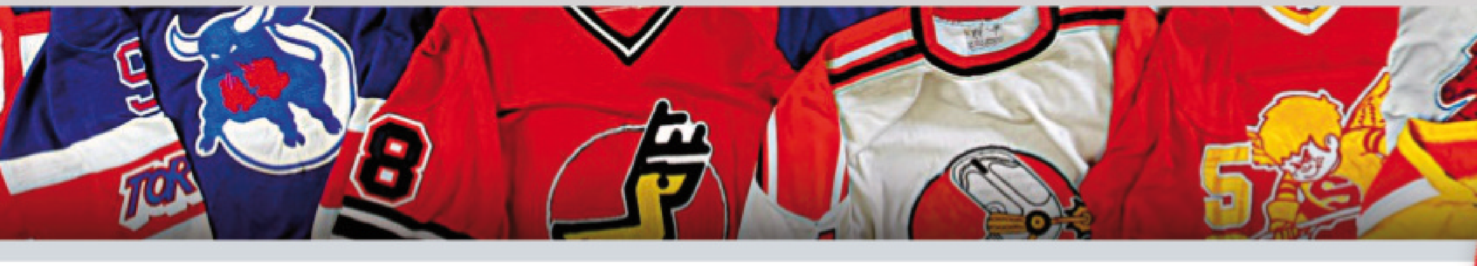


WHA HISTORY: PART 1

Hustlin' the HUSTLERS

Partying, Playboy bunnies, Monopoly money, fake arenas – the early days of the WHA had it all. Promises were made, high rollers were wined and dined, facts were stretched. The prospective ownership group of the New England franchise was a bunch of wide-eyed kids trying to crack the old-boys club. And, boy, did they ever. By the time the first puck had even been dropped, they already had a whale of a story to tell

BY HOWARD BALDWIN WITH KAREN BALDWIN

TODAY, THE NHL HAS 32 teams spread across Canada and the United States. Once a regional niche sport, the league has grown into a massive multi-billion-dollar industry under the tenure of commissioner Gary Bettman.

But it didn't happen overnight. Before the evolution, there was a revolution, precipitated by a new league: the World Hockey Association.

The WHA changed the salary structure for any and all players. The league opened up opportunities for Americans and Europeans, including players from the then Communist Bloc. It prompted the underage draft and the abolishment of the reserve clause (which bound players to a team for life even though it was only a one-year contract), and it created important rule changes, like sudden-death overtime.

In 1966, hockey only had six major-pro teams, the 'Original Six' of the NHL as they are now known, with about 150 legitimate NHL-caliber players league-wide. By 1974, there were 32 major-pro teams, including 14 in the WHA, amounting to about 800 players across both leagues.

The revolution was in full swing.

This is the story of the revolutionary years of the early 1970s, which helped stimulate the growth of hockey in North America and the NHL. This is the history of the WHA.

Full disclosure, as the very word "history" suggests ("his" "story"), this is my story of the WHA as I know it, as told through my eyes. I was there from the beginning through to the end.

In 1970, I pulled away from the Philadelphia Spectrum for the last time as an employee of the Philadelphia Flyers. I had worked for an organization led by the great Ed Snider, and I loved every minute. Yet for some reason, I felt compelled to move on. I didn't really know why I was making a decision that seemed so truly absurd. I mean, I was 27 and working for an NHL team. They liked me. Or at least they said they did. But I knew deep in my gut that to achieve my purpose, I had to strike out on my own. Anything else was standing still.

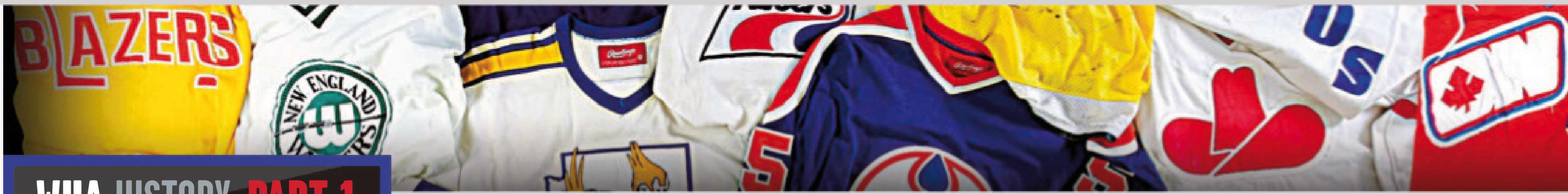
I came from an old blue-blood family in the Northeastern United States. The rule of thumb was to attend St. Paul's or Groton or Milton Academy. Anything else was a failure. Then, one moved on to Harvard or maybe a secondary Ivy League college. Again, anything else was a failure. A job on Wall Street with some prestigious financial institution was considered the Holy Grail.

I was a hopeless student, hopeless. In today's world, there are many diagnoses for my plight then, but for me, it was termed "failure." I went to Salisbury School, which was then a small unknown prep school in the northwest corner of Connecticut. Despite taking what they called a "post-graduate" year at Salisbury, I barely graduated with a squeak-by average of D-.

The comments were always, by and large, the same: "Howdy (my nickname) tries hard but just doesn't get the world of academia." Yikes. I try hard and am still stupid. Help!

So, I passed on Harvard and joined the Marines. Afterward, I stumbled around until I had

JERSEYS+PATCH: DAVE SANDFORD/HHOF IMAGES



the incredibly good fortune to join the Jersey Devils of the old Eastern League, the league of *Slap Shot*. After a year, which I loved, I went to work for the Flyers in their ticket office.

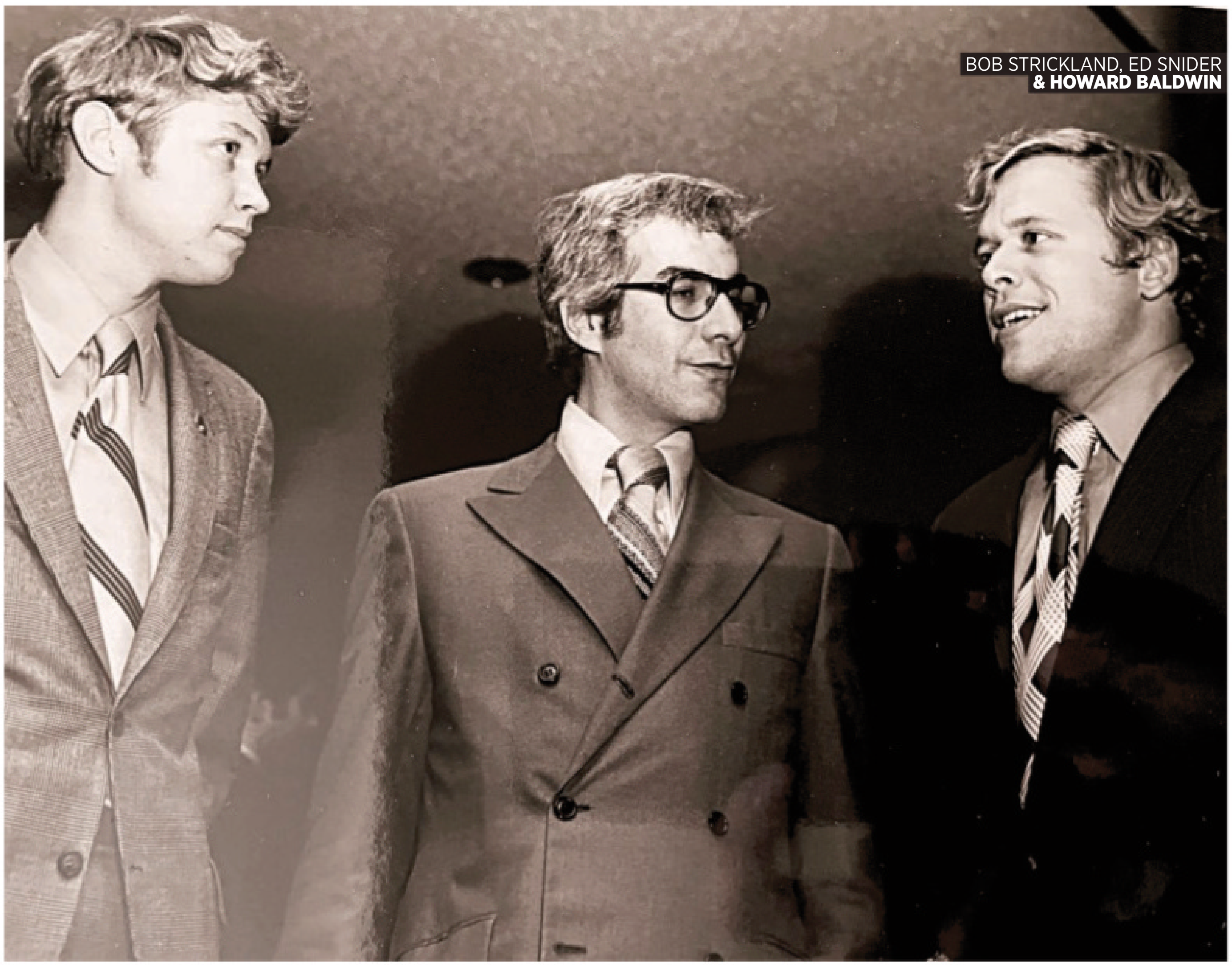
And now I was leaving the Flyers? I guess I really must be dumb after all.

Anyway, I settled in Marion, Mass., where there was the safety net of family. I was working for a small clothing store with a childhood friend, John 'Coby' Coburn, a somewhat kindred spirit who graduated from Harvard as a Latin major. *Dominus Vobiscum* (the Lord be with you). What do you do with that?

One day, while reading the morning paper, I saw a small article about a new league being formed by the two founders of the American Basketball Association: Gary Davidson and Dennis Murphy, both from the not so "hot bed of hockey" of Newport Beach, Calif. They were looking for applicants. I looked at Coby. He looked at me. If this was a Hollywood moment, a burst of light would've flashed and a choir would've sung. This was our epiphany.

I called the number in the article and reached the lovable Irishman Dennis Murphy. And thus, the hustle began. Dennis gave us the background and the status of the new league.

The intent was to start with 12 teams and grow from there.


BOB STRICKLAND, ED SNIDER
& HOWARD BALDWIN

According to Dennis, franchise interest was "vast," from Los Angeles to Long Island to Miami and, of course, Calgary, Edmonton and Winnipeg. They had done something similar (and successfully) with the ABA in challenging the NBA.

"And what is your background, and where do you want a franchise?" they asked.

I told them I had worked for the Flyers (purposely neglecting, of course, to say my position wasn't exactly high up) and that Coby and I were Boston-based, where our families were well-known, and where hockey was currently king. We wanted to drive our stake in the ground for New England, with a specific target of Providence, R.I., where a new arena was being built. We would also be happy with Boston, but that was more complicated – as it not only had the Boston Bruins, led by the great Bobby Orr, but also the Boston Braves, which were setting attendance records in the AHL. We purposely did not tell them our ages.

Dennis said they would send us (by mail, of course, as there was no internet in those days) the by-laws, constitution and necessary paperwork. If our application looked promising, he would fly into Boston for a face-to-face visit.

> I hung up the phone, looked at Coby and said, 'Now what the hell do we do?' - HOWARD BALDWIN

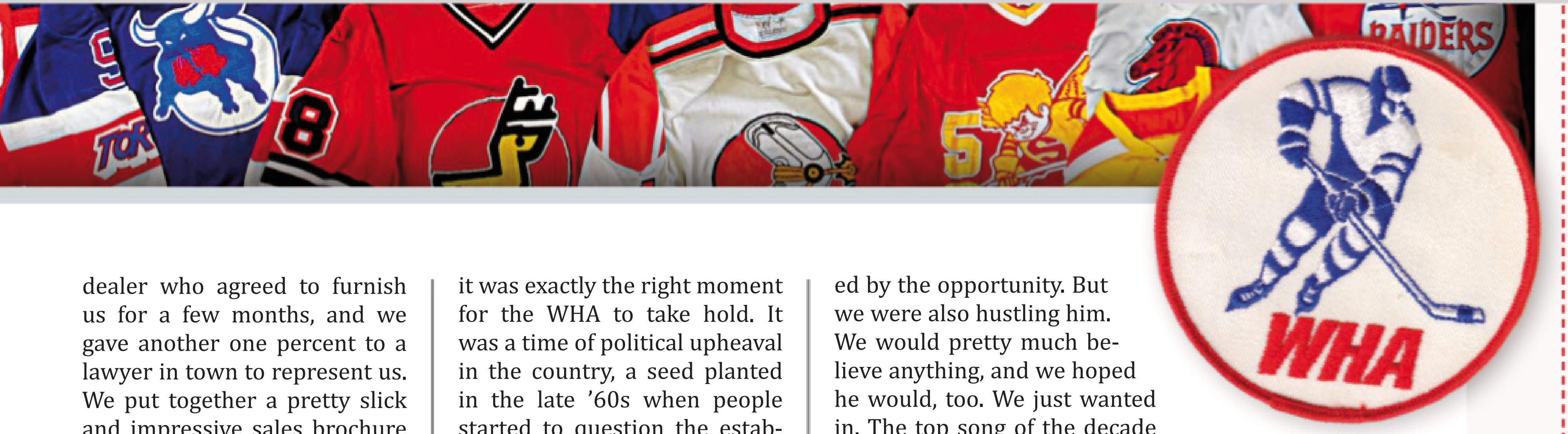
JERSEY DEVILS
JERSEY DEVILS
VIC STASIUK,
MARCEL PELLETIER
& JERRY RAFTER

"Great," we said. We can't wait!"

I hung up the phone, looked at Coby and said, "Now what the hell do we do?"

We hustled and rented an office for a six-month stretch. We gave a one-percent share of the team to a friend, an antique

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOWARD & KAREN BALDWIN



dealer who agreed to furnish us for a few months, and we gave another one percent to a lawyer in town to represent us. We put together a pretty slick and impressive sales brochure (something I learned with the Flyers) extolling the virtues of the market and our pedigree, leaning heavily on our family names and contacts. The New England roots were finally coming in handy. We even put a few friends of our families on our board. To this day, the people we listed had no idea they were a part of a company trying to get a franchise in a professional hockey league. But the names were impressive.

The paperwork arrived shortly thereafter in the mail. We feasted our eyes on the material. What stood out immediately was that, in haste to generate quality paperwork, Davidson and Murphy neglected in a few places to change the terminology from basketball to hockey when referring to the product itself, often referring to the ice surface as “the court.” But we couldn’t have cared less. We were obsessed with securing a franchise in this rebel league and making our fortune.

Truthfully, I was singularly focused on this quest – “obsessed” would be a fair statement. In hindsight, I was lucky enough to be in pursuit of my goals in 1971, the only time in the history of sports in which the dream of a young man to own a franchise could become a reality. There was never a time before, nor would there ever be a time again, for this to hold true.

It is key to understand a bit about what was going on in the U.S. in the early 1970s, and why it was exactly the right moment for the WHA to take hold. It was a time of political upheaval in the country, a seed planted in the late ’60s when people started to question the establishment and push back against authority. There had been corruption and assassinations, and suddenly, people questioned if the status quo held up any longer. On the positive side, it was a time for Civil Rights, Equal Rights and a new American Dream to take hold.

Title IX opened sports to a new segment of the population – women – and television created a need for programming. It was the “perfect storm” for a rebel league to take hold.

Back to the story. Within a couple of weeks of our application being submitted, Dennis did indeed arrive in Boston. He was a short, rather round guy with an infectious smile and personality. If you were casting Dennis, Mickey Rooney would be perfect. Dennis gave us the franchise and timeline rundown. We did our best to try to impress him with our business and financial acumen.

By July 1971, Dennis said they already had 10 other teams: Winnipeg, owned by Ben Hatskin; Edmonton, owned by ‘Wild’ Bill Hunter (a P.T. Barnum character if there ever were one); Calgary, owned by Scotty Munro; Dayton, owned by Paul Deneau; Miami, owned by Herb Martin; Long Island, owned by Neil Shayne; Chicago, owned by the Kaiser brothers; Minnesota, owned by Irv Kaplan; San Francisco, owned by WHA co-founder Gary Davidson; and Los Angeles, owned by Dennis himself. Plus, according to Dennis, they had many other applicants.

We were an easy hustle for Dennis because we were blinded by the opportunity. But we were also hustling him. We would pretty much believe anything, and we hoped he would, too. We just wanted in. The top song of the decade was an apropos soundtrack: James Brown’s *Everybody’s Doin’ the Hustle*. The real credibility of the league were the Canadian teams. The three prospective owners were established Canadian junior operators and were accepted in the sport.

When the discussion of where we would get players came up, Dennis was adamant that if we offered enough money, players would jump leagues, and their NHL contracts would never hold up. He made it seem like players and their reps would be eager to line up to join the new league.

We shook hands with Dennis, and he outlined the next steps for us to follow to secure the New England franchise. Then he left to visit the next applicants.

After the visit from Dennis, we had our marching orders. Individually, as potential new owners, we had to secure a place to play, and we had to raise the money for a franchise fee and league dues. Collectively, this had to happen in 12 different viable cities.

If you step back and think about it today, what we were confronted with was absolutely an impossible task. The league had to firm up ownership in 12 markets that hopefully could support some form of major-league hockey. With 12 new franchises at 25 players per team, the league would have to find 300 new qualified players from somewhere. Most importantly, the ownership of each team would have to be able to withstand financial losses until break-even happened, if ever. On top of that, we had to hope the theory that the existing NHL player contract was a farce.

Not a bad challenge if one had two or three years. We had about 14 months.

The only challenge Coby and I worried about was, first and foremost, where do we play? At the same time, we had to come up with the entry fee of $25,000 as well as $10,000 in league dues. Not an insurmountable sum, but, remember, we had nothing. Our families had money, but they certainly weren’t going to give it to us for this venture. And keep in mind, in 1971, the price of a new sports car was $3,000, so it kind of was like Monopoly money we were talking about.

From that first visit from Dennis to the scheduled first meeting in October 1971, we spent the great part of the time pulling out all the stops for Providence. The new arena looked to be a beauty. It was ideal. Unfortunately, Providence, at that time, was a corrupt city. The owner of the AHL’s Providence Reds had the building and the city politicians in his back pocket. We quickly realized we had no chance.

So, we turned our eyes to Boston. The Boston Garden was a pipe dream, but maybe the Boston Arena, which was a dump when my father played there during his Harvard years (1933 being his last year there), would work.

While hustling for a place to play, we also began the effort to raise enough money for

SLIM AND NONE

> As we hit the 50-year anniversary of the start of the WHA, we asked league-founding owner Howard Baldwin – with the help of his wife, Karen – to look back at his time with the league. This is Part 1 of the four-part series, and you can learn much more about the WHA’s history in Baldwin’s *Slim And None* podcast at **thehockeynews.com/wha**

the entry fee and league dues. We raised the $10,000 from a mutual friend, Peter Leonard, in return for 2.5 percent of the franchise.

About this time, we brought in two key members to our founding team. Bill Barnes, a fabulous marketing guy and as good a person as there ever was. He also was about 10 years older than us and could be construed as being "stable." He was born looking "mature." Then we added Godfrey 'Woody' Wood, an investment banker who, of course, went to my favorite college, Harvard. (Where would we be without Harvard?) Woody was a huge asset and the key to finding our financier.

During this time, from July to the first meeting in New York in early October, we thought of nothing else but getting $25,000 and finding a place to play. We didn't really give the league itself a whole lot of thought. We didn't think about a staff or a GM or a coach. We needed none of that without a place to play and our entry fee. If we got in, then we would worry about the "big picture."

Dennis, Don Reagan (the league consul) and Gary, who we had yet to meet, filled us in with the rest of the league's doings. We constantly were hearing about this city or that city wanting to come in. Dennis actually had the chutzpah to say the NHL had made a call or two about a merger.

Frankly, most of it was bulls---. But we all heard what we wanted to hear – the brass band. If we had a clue that the league was scrambling as much as it was, we might have paused.

On second thought, I doubt it.

Technically and legally, the WHA was formed in June 1971 in Southern California. The key members were Davidson and Murphy, who also each owned a franchise. Hatskin, Hunter and Munro were the Canadian "hockey credibility," and kicking the tires were individuals from Minnesota, Chicago, Miami, Dayton and New York. From the original list of prospective applicants at a meeting in Los Angeles in September 1971 to the final list at the league's inaugural meetings in New York at the end of April 1972, there was almost an 80 percent turnover in names. Most of the meetings in between were spent on coming up with operational plans for the proposed new members – player budgets, performance bonds and such.

Our first trial was the October 1971 meeting in New York at the Americana Inn. We knew we could be in trouble as we hadn't resolved a place to play. So, we did what we were getting pretty good at: stretching the facts. Worse case, we felt we could get into Boston Arena and maybe Providence. But we did have our entry check of $25,000 and our league dues of $10,000, so somehow we had a hunch that in a room of "thirsty pilgrims," the money would make an impression.

Coby, Woody and our lawyer, George Perkins (who defined the word conservative) checked into the hotel filled with hope and confidence. For a day and a half, we sat waiting to be called. Sitting still is not my strongest suit, so at one point, we all walked across the street to see an X-rated movie to take our mind off the matters at hand. And wouldn't you know it, there in the theater were a couple of other potential applicants.

Finally, we are summoned to the luxurious suite of Gary Davidson. There in the room were smiling Dennis and four of the other owners: Hatskin, Hunter, Munro and Deneau. Now, remember, except for our lawyer, none of us had hit 30 yet. And when you are young, older seems old, and, in fairness to them, younger looks young. If looks could kill, we would be dead. You could see them thinking, "Who are these young, spoiled kids thinking they belong in our game?" We were thinking, "Whoa, this is a serious group of tough old bastards."

Mercifully, we had our checks. That helped thaw the room. Then we did our presentation. And when it was over, we left to silence.

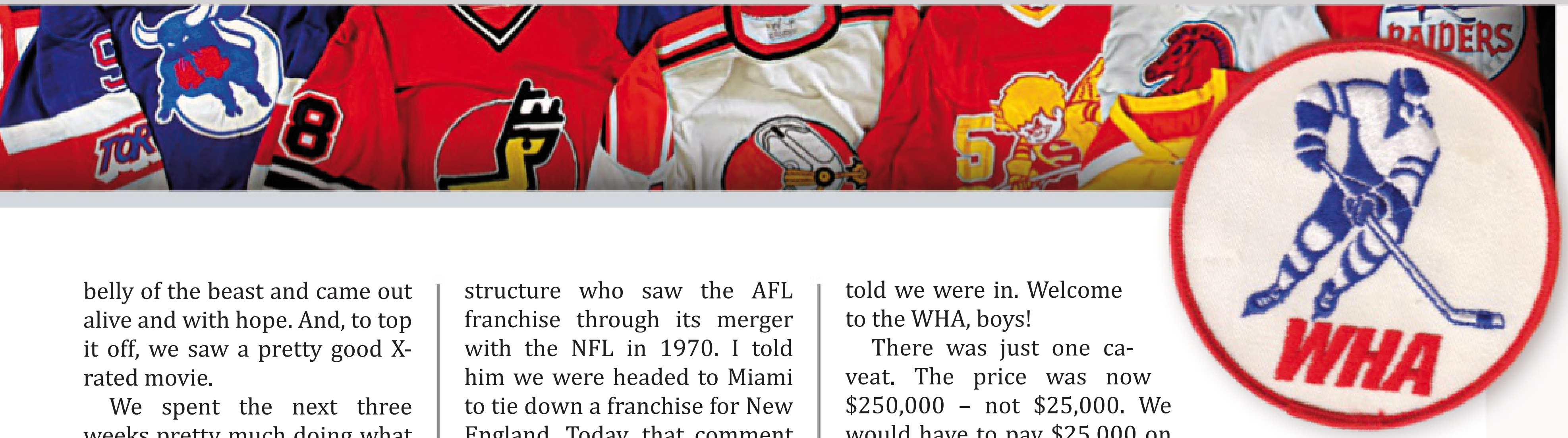
The next morning, we were called back. We were told that they really wanted us in. They were taking 10 franchises and would add two more in November. Get a place to play and you will be in, we were told. We fled the city, and we couldn't wait to get home.

We were determined to get an arena. We had survived the first meeting. We went into the

NEW ENGLAND WHALERS
AVCO WORLD TROPHY CHAMPIONS

JACK KELLEY, **HOWARD BALDWIN** & RON RYAN

PHOTO COURTESY OF HOWARD & KAREN BALDWIN



belly of the beast and came out alive and with hope. And, to top it off, we saw a pretty good X-rated movie.

We spent the next three weeks pretty much doing what we did all summer – desperately seeking a lease on an arena in New England. We knew we could get the Boston Arena, so we embraced the thought so that the league could see we had a plan. We still hadn't really thought about overall financing, a GM, etc. After all, there would be nothing to finance unless we had a franchise. It was all moot unless we became members.

We quickly received notice that the next WHA meeting was to be held the third week of November in another hockey "hotbed," Miami Beach, at the Fontainebleau hotel. We quickly realized our league founders liked "fun." Coby, Woody and I headed to Miami. On our way there, another hand of fate rested on my shoulder. As I sat in my seat on the Eastern Airlines plane, I looked up and saw a familiar face: Phil David Fine.

Fine was a "power lawyer" in Boston, if there were such a thing. He was very well-known for being the brains behind Schaefer Stadium, home of the New England Patriots. I had met Fine only once through my family, and he tried to help me at the time to land any job in sports anywhere. I reintroduced myself, and thank goodness there was a hint of recognition from that one meeting. And also he had heard about "the crazy kids" trying to get a hockey franchise in Boston to compete with the Bruins.

Fine knew that upstart leagues could work. After all, he was part of the Patriots power structure who saw the AFL franchise through its merger with the NFL in 1970. I told him we were headed to Miami to tie down a franchise for New England. Today, that comment might have gotten me thrown off the plane for being a nut. Not then. Fine looked me in the eye and said, "Go get that franchise, and if you do, I will find you a place to play."

The Boston Garden. Gulp. Here we go.

We checked into the Fontainebleau and again waited to be summoned for our latest "update." And we waited…and waited. Gary and Dennis somehow made us feel like there was a long list of applicants (there wasn't), so we sweated. But, as usual, we found a diversion. Our hotel abutted the Playboy hotel. And the pool was below us. The views were captivating to say the least.

There was only one other applicant, Doug Michel from Ottawa, who may have had less money than we did. He was in the plumbing business, but he was determined. Gary and Dennis kept us away from each other, lest we compare notes and create a united front – or, even worse, head for the hills.

Finally, we were summoned. In the room were Gary, Dennis and the Canadian trio of Hatskin, Hunter and Munro, as well as Deneau from Dayton. We gave our short update and also hurled our new lawyer and friend's name into the mix – Mr. Phil David Fine. We got enough of their attention for them to ask us to step out of the room for a minute.

We were then invited back in, and, with a smile and polite applause from the room, were told we were in. Welcome to the WHA, boys!

There was just one caveat. The price was now $250,000 – not $25,000. We would have to pay $25,000 on the spot and then pay the rest by February.

Coby, Woody and I looked at each other, and we asked if we could step out of the room for a minute to discuss. In the hall, we looked at each other and burst out laughing. "We have been flying by the seat of our pants thus far. Let's keep it going." We barely had $25,000 – much less $250,000 – so who really cares?

We came back in the room and said, "We are in." Thus, we became the 11th franchise in the WHA. Michel in Ottawa would become the 12th.

On the flight home, we decided to take advantage of our new status as franchise owners. We upgraded to first class, partied on the plane, complete with a laugh box that Coby sometimes brought along for giggles, and headed home. The Whalers of the WHA had been born.

I remember meeting Coby the next morning at our local haunt. We looked at each other and realized that now we had to come through. We had nine months to get financed, hire a full staff led by a credible hockey leader, find a place to play, etc. It was early December 1971. A holiday month.

So opening day was only eight months away. And we were one of 12 teams faced with the same task. Who was giggling now?

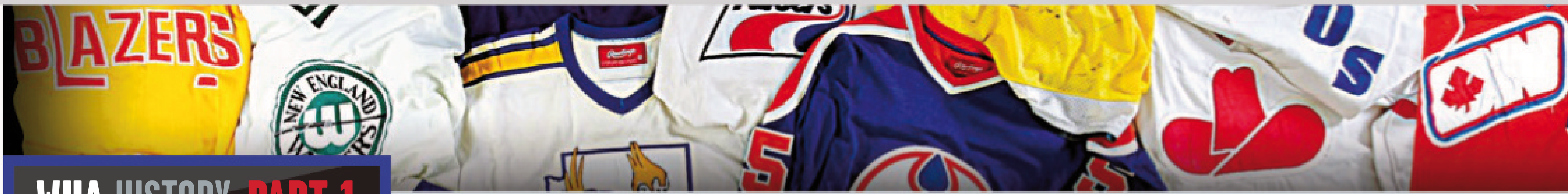
The task in front of us was awesome, but the only way to achieve our goals was to invoke the words of the Daytona 500: "Gentlemen (some of us), start your engines." Woody immediately attacked the money aspect of things. He set up a meeting with Bob Schmertz, who owned 25 percent of the NBA's Portland Trailblazers. Bob had made his fortune with a company called Leisure Technology, a retirement community of homes based in Lakewood, N.J. He had never seen a hockey game, and he knew little to nothing about the game itself, but he knew sports and opportunities. He seemed eager to meet, so we quickly had a meeting in New Bedford, Mass.

It was some meeting. First, Bob landed at the wrong airport, not realizing it was *New* Bedford, not Bedford. We eventually found each other. It was a cold Saturday morning when Coby and I picked up Bob and his lawyer and headed right into the offices of our conservative lawyer, George Perkins. If the office didn't kill the deal, nothing would. Bob asked what we were proposing. It was easy: $1.5 million for 60 percent of the team. Then we held our breath.

Bob looked at us and said, "Here's what I will do: I will provide a line of credit of $1 million and give you $300,000 in equity." No leaving the room on this one. Coby and I looked at each other and said "OK" in unison. The meeting from landing to takeoff took only an hour and a half.

On the way to the airport,

"You could see them thinking, 'Who are these young, spoiled kids thinking they belong in our game?' We were thinking, 'Whoa, this is a serious group of tough old bastards' **- HOWARD BALDWIN**



Bob asked us what we intended to pay ourselves. We gulped, crossing our fingers and hoping our answer wouldn't blow the deal. "We want $18,000 each," I answered. "I would be president. Coby would be vice-president and treasurer."

"No, that's not quite fair," Bob replied. "For what you boys will be doing, you should be earning $20,000 each."

We thought we were dreaming. We were now the most well-financed team in the WHA.

Gary and Dennis couldn't believe it. Of course, we didn't tell them that as Bob got on his private jet to leave he said, "By the way, Howard, tell Misters Davidson and Murphy that there is no way we are paying any $225,000 premium."

Bob was so above and beyond a great partner. Not only did he save us from getting hustled out of an additional $225,000, he personally guaranteed almost every contract. We became good friends, and years later, I asked what had made him invest in us. He just said, "I liked you both and had faith you guys would pull it off."

To this day, Gary Davidson and I are great friends. Over a recent dinner, Gary told me that in those first months, they felt that, after the meeting in November at the Fontainebleau, it would be a miracle if half of the teams didn't have either new owners or were in a new city by the next meeting. He said they always needed 12 in the room. And they knew many who came into the league were just placeholders. As long as they always "traded up," they felt the league would grow in strength.

RON RYAN, HOWARD BALDWIN, JOHN COBURN & GODFREY WOOD
WORLD HO
ASSOCIAT

PHOTO COURTESY OF HOWARD & KAREN BALDWIN

> By then, we had learned that, when it came to money, 'When you don't got it, it's easy to spend it.' So every member, including us, said they were in for their $100,000 to sign Hull - **HOWARD BALDWIN**

They were right. The next WHA meeting after November was February in Chicago, and the parade of changes had already started. Gary sold his San Francisco franchise to a group in Quebec led by Marius Fortier, a great guy, full of passion. That ownership morphed up to Paul Racine, who quickly became a pillar of strength for the league.

St. Paul changed ownership. Paul Deneau moved Dayton to Houston. I was never a fan of Paul's, but I will give him this: he had the good sense to pick a damn good market. He also picked one heck of a good hockey guy in Bill Dineen. It was Bill who was responsible for the Howes coming to the WHA in the league's second season.

And then there was the Miami team, the Screaming Eagles. They were a founding member, and they did three things that caught everyone's attention. First, they signed Bernie Parent for a huge sum of money. Easy to do as they had no money anyway, so why not? Then they sent pictures of their new arena, which was "under construction." Thanks to the astute eye of Alan Eagleson, who actually bothered to take the time to look at the picture of the arena, we noticed palm trees growing as you looked through the front door. It turned out they had constructed a Hollywood set two-wall facade. The building, the team and the owner were all fakes. To top it all off, the franchise's $10,000 check for league dues bounced.

Out of the jaws of defeat can come victory, and so the Miami Screaming Eagles became the Philadelphia Blazers, led by Jim Cooper and Bernie Brown, who promptly gave Parent a raise and an even more outrageous contract to play in Philly.

Then one more NHL mistake led to another franchise opportunity for us. As a reaction to seeing a competitive new league developing, the NHL organized its own two-team expansion. The intention was to block the WHA. What sounded like a good plan maybe was not. Yes, the NHL took in Long Island and Atlanta, but the league rejected other good markets.

Cleveland for one, was led by a great promoter with a very high profile, Nick Mileti. Nick owned the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Cleveland Indians. He was a "catch," a kindred WHA spirit filled with enthusiasm and the spirit of "refusing to be denied."

Very early on, I flew out to Cleveland to meet Nick. He was a bigger star than any player in the market. He had gold chains around his neck, and despite it

being warmer weather, he wore a fur coat. He took me out to the Cleveland Coliseum, which was in the middle of nowhere. We stood together on the entryway looking over the magnificent structure being built, and he said to me, “ ‘Baldy’ (his nickname for me), the joy is in creating, not maintaining. I am not a janitor.”

BOBBY **HULL**

GRAPHIC ARTISTS/HHOF IMAGES

Lo and behold, one year later, his building opened, and all the WHA owners were invited. A bus took us to the arena. A feeling of apprehension arose as the bus drove down the highway from Cleveland, passed a few miles beyond the Coliseum, got off the highway and came back to the Coliseum. Did the driver miss it? Nope. The state only put one exit in to get there. Somehow, we knew that would be a problem.

At the opening, which included a Frank Sinatra concert, every attendee received a gold coin on a chain with Nick’s picture on one side and Frank’s on the other. That said it all.

Of course, all the franchise movement was concerning, but we had nothing to gauge it by. We had plenty of our own challenges at home. We had our financing. Now we, and the other teams, had to get down to business and hire a full hockey and marketing staff and get ready for the first WHA draft in the “hockey hotbed” of the WHA headquarters in Orange County.

We reached out to Jack Kelley, who was the top college coach in the country at the time, having won two NCAA championships at Boston University, and got him to sign with us. (It was Jack’s wife, Ginny, who suggested the nickname “Whalers” for the team.) We knew Jack would have a firm hand on the hockey operations. He quickly hired Ron Ryan, who was coaching at Colgate, and Jack Ferreira, who was coaching at Brown, both former all-American players. Needless to say, they did a brilliant job in putting together a great team.

Each WHA team started to build. Los Angeles hired Terry Slater, a great hockey guy. Houston had Dineen. Quebec had Maurice Filion and then hired ‘Rocket’ Richard as coach. Edmonton had Hunter. Quite quickly, each team had assembled a credible hockey staff.

The draft itself was wild. It went 70 rounds. Even the Governor of Minnesota was drafted – and Russians. And, of course, every NHL player, including Bobby Orr.

Kelley’s *modus operandi* was to draft a team that had local identity both at the college level and the pro level. And pros who were young and had a bright future, players like Tom Webster, Brad Selwood, Jim Dorey, Larry Pleau, Rick Ley and others.

Some of the teams threw their eggs in the basket of a few identifiable names and then had a drop-off. Our total payroll that first year in the WHA was $650,000 – and that was on the higher end of the league.

Then there was Bobby Hull. Where would the WHA have been without Bobby Hull? When Hatskin walked into a league meeting announcing he could sign Hull for a $1-million signing bonus and then $250,000 a year, no one quite believed it, including me. He and Gary said it had a chance, and each franchise had to chip in $100,000.

By then, we had learned that, when it came to money, “When you don’t got it, it’s easy to spend it.” So every member, including us, said they were in for their $100,000. We had our money actually, even though no one really believed ‘Big Ben’ could deliver Hull. But he did.

Another meeting was quickly called. I made so many trips to Chicago that it was becoming a second home. At the meeting, it was made clear Hull could be signed, so reality had set in, and now everyone had to throw in their $100,000. We paid. Mileti came through. Philly came through. Not everyone else did. Some of us anted up more, and Ben put up more.

Hatskin and Winnipeg were early heroes of the league. The Hull signing rocked the NHL. It opened up the floodgates for player signings. Players figured, “If Bobby Hull could jump leagues, why can’t I?”

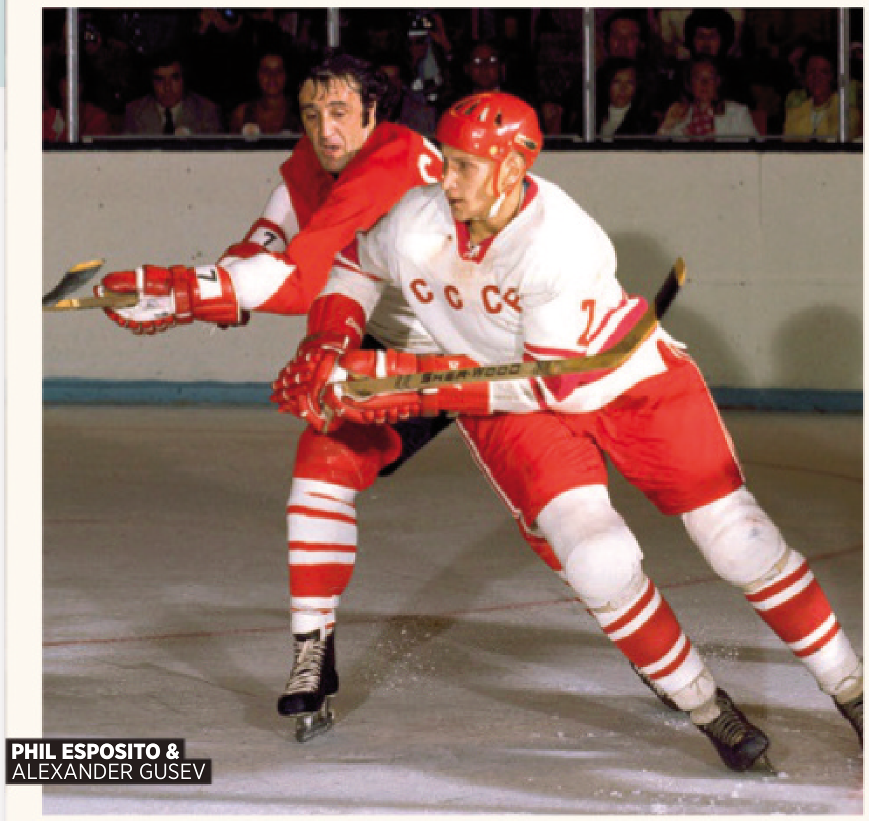
With Hull signing, the WHA was here to stay, and those at the NHL realized they truly had a war on their hands.

Part 2 of Howard Baldwin’s History of the WHA will appear in the next edition of The Hockey News (Vol. 76, Issue 5).

CHATTING WITH *Legen*

xxxxx

16MM FILM: JOHN PRICE/72 SUMMIT PRODUCTIONS INC.; ESPOSITO: PHOTO BY HOCKEY HALL OF FAME; BIDINI: PHOTO COURTESY OF 72 SUMMIT PRODUCTIONS INC.



PHIL ESPOSITO &
ALEXANDER GUSEV

One trip to Florida, three of the game's all-time greats

BY DAVE BIDINI

I **WAS NINE YEARS** old in 1972, raised on Buffalo junk TV and Esso Power Players, those tiny packets of stickered head shots that you pasted in a broad folder on squares outlining the skaters' placement. My memories of this age lie somewhere between rough and fuzzy, hard and soft. I can easily recall the sound of neighbors gathered in the living room for a weekend party while forgetting their melting adult faces, and I know what the band Triumph wore and how their sign lit up when they walked out on stage at 'The Ex,' but I have no idea what songs they played or who came with me to the show.

The 1972 Canada-Russia Summit Series, however, is still perfectly vivid to me – its wobbly game transmissions and visual dropouts from a city I never knew existed until I was told Team Canada would be playing there (Moscow); the way aging broadcaster Foster Hewitt mangled names that even a nine-year-old could pronounce (Cournoyer); the roar of boos in Vancouver; how referee Josef Kompalla crossed his arms over his head to protect himself from J-P Parise's above-the-shoulder slash (Parise pulled back at the last second); and the cold silence that fell over our living room when the final Forum buzzer sounded in Montreal,

> **Dave Bidini** is an author, journalist and musician from Toronto. His latest work, Summit 72, a four-part documentary on the 50th anniversary of the Series, can be seen on CBC and CBC Gem.

MOSCOW MAYHEM

In a defining moment in hockey history, the Canadians capped off a comeback with a win in Game 8.

Game 1, the Russians having skated to a 7-3 win. I can still conjure the pain of that loss, the magic of the team's comeback and the exultation of the Game 8 victory. A few months later, I lined up outside Shoppers Drug Mart in Westway Plaza to get Paul Henderson's autograph for my Power Players folder. Dumbfounded as the line grew shorter and my audience approached, my mom suggested: "Maybe ask him about his watch?"

I didn't get to interview Paul for our documentary – showrunner Nick de Pencier did that, although I've met the former Leaf and Red Wing (and Toro!) a few times – but I travelled to meet some of the other team principals, mostly in Florida, where every retired pro in every sport seems to live.

HARRY **SINDEN**

"I TOLD THEM TO PLAY AS IF WE WERE **AHEAD BY A GOAL RATHER THAN BEHIND** – Harry Sinden

I met with Brad Park, the defenseman who was asked to play the "Bobby Orr role" after the legend was kept out of the lineup because of a knee operation. Park was capable enough moving the puck, but the Russians zig-zagging attack and imposing speed had him, and others, spinning to limit their flow. Ironically, it wasn't until Team Canada moved to the big ice that they were able to manage pressure in their own end – coach Harry Sinden told his forwards to mark the corners of the rink and leave the points open for the Russian defenseman, who didn't shoot the puck well or often – and Park excelled in Canada's key games in Moscow. We talked for a few hours near the banks of a river behind his modest, white-washed home, occasionally interrupted by the harrowing calls of large turkey ducks and his two feral cats clinging to the backdoor screens. Still, Brad was easy company, and wise in his reflections on the Series. He wore shorts, and you could see where the knives and scalpels had done their work.

We went to see Harry Sinden in his West Palm Beach enclave built along the hem of a sprawling golf course. ("Sometimes a few balls come into the yard, rattle around," he said, holding out his hands.) Harry has slowed a little over 80-plus years. One of his coaching trademarks was constant pacing and stream-of-conscious patter behind his players, and when reaching for a cane after showing us in, he boasted: "I don't really need this thing to walk. It's more for support."

Still, Harry took a moment to get to his chair. His impressions of what happened in '72 were sharp, especially how he put his team into a position to win in Russia, despite being down 3-1 after five games. "In the second intermission of Game 8, with the team down 5-3, I told them

PHOTOS BY HOCKEY HALL OF FAME/72 SUMMIT PRODUCTIONS INC.

SERIES SUPERSTARS

The 1972 performances of Henderson, above, and Esposito are still the stuff of legend 50 years later.

HENDERSON+ESPOSITO: PHOTOS BY 72 SUMMIT PRODUCTIONS INC.; TEAM CANADA: PHOTO BY HOCKEY HALL OF FAME

to play as if we were ahead by a goal rather than behind," he remembered. "That way, we could prevent them going up any more, and give us a chance to come back," which they famously did, winning on Henderson's goal with 34 seconds left.

Going into the Series, Sinden was on an island that no one had been on before, or after, considering how different the world is, or was (bringing a team back from humiliation against one of the great opponents ever – the 1970s Russian nationals – while playing behind the Communist shroud is perhaps the greatest coaching performance of all-time). Before leaving, Nick gave Harry, who is Gord Downie's godfather, a copy of *Long Time Running*, the documentary on the last Tragically Hip tour, which Nick made with his wife, Jen. Studying the cover, he said, "Gord was a kind of a big deal up there, eh?" We confirmed that he was. "We don't get much about Canada down here," he said, looking into the distance.

We spent an afternoon with Phil Esposito, the team's legendary de facto captain, who arrived put-out that someone had given him wrong directions. He groused while climbing the stairs to the first floor landing, but I recognized his tone as someone who'd had his ass sandpapered rather being truly resentful. We apologized as he sat down, looked into the camera and told us, "Let's go."

'Espo' was dressed impeccably, with a neatly trimmed goatee, as if he'd visited a barber before going to a wedding, with our shoot in-between. He told us some things we can't print here and some things we can, like the time he got into an elevator fight with Stig Salming or how "the internet will be the ruination of our society." He remembered how put-out he was having to go to training camp in the summer ("It was *August!*"), which made us feel relieved that ours wasn't the first time. He told us that, at first, he didn't want to play in the Series, but that he couldn't say no to Bobby Orr. He also said that, back in the NHL, he could never hit his former teammates, having shared a critical bond.

As he left, we told him how well and robust he looked and seemed. Going down the stairs, he addressed the wall: "If I knew I was gonna live this long, I would have taken better care of myself." H

PHOTO BY MALCOLM LEE GEORGES PHOTOGRAPHY

A FORCE TO RECKON WITH

The PHF's newest entry wants to be an immediate contender. How? With a roster full of fearless 'dogs' **BY JARED CLINTON**

THE GLITZ AND THE glamor was the point. On the day the Montreal Force made official their name and held their jersey unveiling ahead of their inaugural PHF campaign, it was intended to be a celebration and a spectacle, for it to be bold and brash, for the players to be showcased and the team to be put under a brighter spotlight than many had ever experienced before.

"That, for me, was so special," said Force president Kevin Raphael. "That's why during the press conference I spoke to the players, because I wanted them to know that everything they're feeling right now, this is going to be the norm. We're going to treat you as professionals. You're going to always have the absolute best, and always my absolute best."

For some, Raphael isn't a familiar face on the scene. Rest assured, though, he has the credentials. He's provided support to under-16 women's hockey camps in Quebec. He's donated $25,000 to Concordia's women's hockey program. And since the closure of the CWHL – and subsequent folding of Les Canadiennes de Montreal – Raphael and longtime business partner and Force vice-president Emmanuel Anderson have been trying to lay the groundwork for the return of professional women's hockey to Quebec. But it wasn't until he entered into conversation with the PHF that discussions about bringing the pro game back to Montreal finally bore fruit.

What he saw in the PHF was a reflection of his own goals. "It works out because I think they see the same thing that we see, and they allow us to be as creative and as bold as we want to be," Raphael said. "It's not about, 'Well, it's women's hockey, it has to stay at one point.' Nah. It's women's hockey, we see the pinnacle, and we want to reach that pinnacle."

Of course, the pinnacle is a moving target – professional salaries, full-time players and TV and merchandise deals are all signposts en route to a league on par with or exceeding what the WNBA and NWSL provide for their athletes. That is the goal of the franchise, and the entire league, in the macro. On a micro level, though, the pinnacle at this moment is the same for newcomer Montreal as it is for the PHF's established franchises: the Isobel Cup.

And when it comes to fostering on-ice success, Raphael began with a blank canvas and a vision of a team that would represent not just Montreal but the entire province of Quebec. Given the weight of that responsibility, he had a three-point team-building thought process. First, he needed the people. Not players. People. He wanted to build a family atmosphere. Second, he wanted those people to be community-minded, willing to put in the time to share their experiences and talents with the next generation. And third, he wanted one very specific on- and off-ice characteristic. “I need dogs,” he said. “I need people that are not afraid to be who they are and not afraid to say what they want to say, the way they want to say it, and be who they need to be on the ice. We need dogs. We can’t be passive. We need to be going forward in everything.”

ANN-SOPHIE **BETTEZ**

KEVIN **RAPHAEL**

> WHAT I WANTED WAS TO JOIN A TEAM WHERE WE CAN PRACTISE ALL TOGETHER, **PLAY AT THE END OF THE DAY FOR A CHAMPIONSHIP** – Ann-Sophie Bettez

With those attributes in mind, Raphael set out building the roster. His first call, hours after expansion became official, was to Jade Downie-Landry, a bright young star and winner of the same USports’ player-of-the-year honor previously captured by Canadian national-team standouts such as Melodie Daoust, Hayley Wickenheiser and Kim St-Pierre. The next day came a chat with Ann-Sophie Bettez, a veteran whose national-team bona fides would give Montreal immediate legitimacy and genuine star power. Raphael said the conversation took no more than a few minutes.

The official announcement of Downie-Landry and Bettez, along with five additional players, came less than two weeks after Montreal officially joined the PHF ranks. By mid-August, the roster grew to 14 skaters and two goaltenders, including familiar faces such as Brooke Stacey, Catherine Daoust and Sarah Lefort. Notable, too, is that more than half the roster had spent the 2021-22 campaign as members of the PWHPA. That includes Bettez, who said it wasn’t so much about one entity versus the other as it was her own interests at this point in her career. “Doing showcases was less appealing to me,” she said. “The structure, the way they were going to assign players to teams, was less appealing to me. What I wanted was to join a team where we can practise all together, play at the end of the day for a championship. All those things made my choice to go to the PHF.”

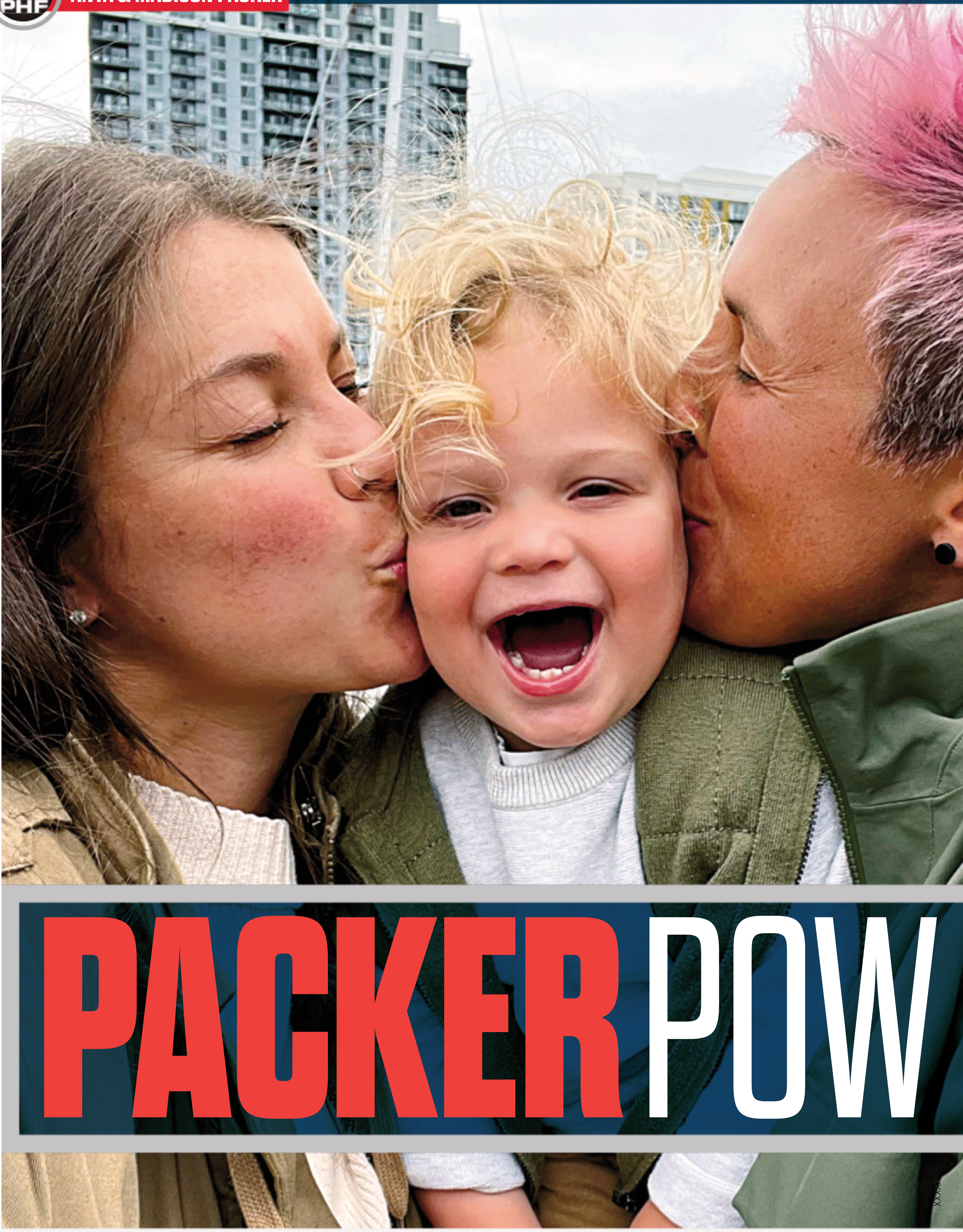
Speaking of structure, though, unique to the Force is its schedule. While based out of Centre 21.02 in Verdun, games will be played entirely on the road, with Montreal, Quebec City, Riviere-du-Loup and Sept-Iles among potential host cities. While others might see it as a disadvantage, Raphael sees an opportunity. The travelling roadshow, he said, gets the Force in front of families and fans who otherwise might not be able to attend their games.

Bettez echoed the sentiment. “It’ll be good promotion for the sport, making sure we reach different fan bases and giving a chance to show those little girls, if they want to play professional hockey, well, it’s not just only every four years it exists,” she said. “We’re going to come to their town and hope they’re going to be able to come watch, have a dream, and a dream one day that can come true.”

But Raphael drove home that it’s not just about a feel-good story. The Force want to live up to their name and become a championship contender that rises to relevance in a city, and province, that demands winners. “We’re not doing all that it is we’re doing just to say we’re playing in the league,” he said. “That’s not our mentality. Our mentality is that every time we step on the ice, we’ve got to give them a show they’ll never forget. If we do that? We’re going to win games.”

BETTEZ: MALCOLM LEE GEORGES PHOTOGRAPHY; RAPHAEL: PHOTO BY ÉMILIE LAPOINTE

ANYA & MADISON PACKER



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PACKER POW

LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PACKER FAMILY; RIGHT: PHOTO BY NWHL

Meet **Anya** and **Madison Packer**, hockey's new power couple. What started out as a rivalry eventually turned into a marriage. And now, with one in the dressing room and the other in management, both are pushing hard to move women's hockey forward. Together, they are a formidable force, both on and off the ice

BY IAN KENNEDY

A LIFE FULL OF happiness comes into focus while scrolling through photos of Anya and Madison Packer. Anya smiles with her entire face, while Madison often looks mischievous. Their expressions are painted across an engagement in the park, wedding photos by the water, beach vacations and the birth of their children.

Among the moments, there is hockey too. Between the everyday joy the Packers exude and the struggles obscured from their timelines, hockey is the thread connecting the fabric of their lives. Intermingled with photos of Anya and Madison dressed as explorers atop dinosaurs for Halloween, there are championship trophies. Mixed in with marriage and parenting, there are workouts, practices, travel and games. These are two women who, as children, fell in love with hockey and, as adults, fell in love with each other, pooling a passion for the sport into one powerful team.

Last season, Anya Packer was GM of the PHF's Metropolitan Riveters. A former player in the NCAA for Boston University and a pro in both the CWHL and NWHL, and then the executive director of the NWHL Players' Association, Anya has, at every level, fought for the game she loves, both on and off the ice. Madison Packer is a five-time PHF all-star and captain of the Riveters. She has been in the PHF since it was founded in 2015-16 (then as the NWHL).

Together, the wife and wife duo are impacting women's hockey and the lives of a new generation of athletes. The Packers, Anya and Madison, have quickly become hockey's new power couple.

A decade ago, Anya Battaglino was a walk-on for Boston University. She knew who Madison Packer was, but they'd never met. Both born in 1991, Battaglino had admired Packer from afar. Packer was a top NCAA recruit before joining the University of Wisconsin. In 2011, Packer helped Wisconsin defeat Battaglino and Boston to capture the national title. Packer was a star, and Battaglino had taken notice. "I knew my wife so much longer than she knew who I was," Anya said. "I was on the losing end of multiple hockey games against Madison Packer long before she knew who I was, or we actually met. It's hard, especially in the hockey world. You play against someone and say, 'I know you and I don't like you because I can never seem to beat you.' Then we met, and I had a completely different take on it."

REMEMBER THE WHALE
Anya's pro career began with the CWHL's Boston Blades before moving on to the NWHL's Connecticut Whale.

After meeting Madison, Anya, who described herself as a "superfan" of her future wife, got on the phone with a friend and said, "I just met Madison Packer, and I think I like her."

When her NCAA career ended, Battaglino began playing for the CWHL's Boston Blades, helping them win the Clarkson Cup in 2013. In 2015, both Packer and Battaglino signed to play in the inaugural season of the fledgling NWHL – Battaglino for the Connecticut Whale, and Packer for the New York Riveters. Battaglino soon became executive director for the NWHLPA. There, she would be connected to Packer, who was at a crossroads in her career. Packer had sustained a hip injury requiring reconstructive surgery. With the lack of pay in the NWHL, and a need for security, Packer decided to retire. After her surgery, however, her love for the game became overwhelming. She needed to return. Her first call was to the NWHLPA, and Battaglino was on the other end.

Battaglino helped Packer through her comeback, but she also inquired about meeting. Packer declined. "She helped guide those conversations about my return," Packer said. "She was part of bringing me back into the league. Then she asked if I wanted to have a drink sometime, and I was like, 'No, not really, I'm all set.' "

Upon her return, Packer continued starring on the ice, playing in numerous NWHL All-Star Games and winning the 2018 Isobel Cup with the Riveters. Soon, however, Anya seized an opportunity to meet Madison. "We'd kept in touch, talking about how it is to be back, how's the hip, just friendly banter," Madison said.

Then, coaching at the Beantown tournament in Boston, Packer received a message from Anya. "She texted me asking, 'What are you up to this weekend?' I told her, 'I'm coaching Beantown,' and she said, 'Me too, we should have that drink.' I thought, 'She's relentless,' so I agreed."

As it happens, Battaglino wasn't in Boston at all. At the chance to finally meet Packer, she hopped into her car and made the almost three-hour drive from Connecticut to Boston to meet her. They've been together ever since. "I didn't find out until after we were married that she actually wasn't coaching Beantown," said Packer with a laugh.

That first meeting sparked a relationship, both in hockey and personally. The couple soon made it official, and they were married in August 2019 in Newport, R.I. Anya chose to take Madison's last name, fusing two influential voices in women's hockey into the game's newest power couple: the Packers.

Riveters star Madison became the second player in PHF history to reach 100 career points last season.

In hockey, the duo was determined to drive the women's game forward. Madison continued her on-ice dominance for the Riveters, including as the team transitioned from the NWHL into the newly formed PHF. In 2022, she became only the second player in league history to score 100 career points.

Off the ice, Anya's star was on the rise as well. She was named one of Sportsnet's 25 most powerful women in hockey, and to *Forbes*' 30 under-30 sports list. It was for good reason.

With salaries remaining one of the key hurdles for the sustainability of professional women's hockey, Anya fought to raise the NWHL's salary cap 50 percent, resulting in a 30-percent pay increase for players. It was a monumental step. Hired as GM of the Riveters in 2021, Anya continued to fight. "When I look at the budget as a general manager, I wish it was a hundred times more than it is," she said. "But I look at it and think, 'Wow, this is a step forward,' and I look at next year's budget and it's another step forward."

She sees new commitments and pledges from ownership, media agreements and television contracts, and increased sponsorship revenue in the PHF as signs that things are moving in the right direction. She also sees the on-ice product improving and engaging new fans each season. As well, women's hockey is gaining TV coverage, media attention and, importantly, financial support.

The pair points to the announcement of a $25-million investment in player salaries over the next three seasons from owners as a sign the league is turning the corner. Similarly, the WNBA announced a $75-million investment as the league moves for autonomy away from the NBA, and players in the NWSL continue to see salaries rise.

Women's sport is growing across North America, and the PHF, along with the Packers, is waiting to pounce on the opportunity. "The culture of people is starting to look at women's athletes as athletes, period," Anya said. "It's all culminating into a really strong position for the PHF and the players in the PHF."

On the ice, Madison, as one of the league's stars, says players

MICHELLE JAY/PHF

FAMILY WAY
Anya and Madison are parents to 2-year-old son Waylon and baby daughter Harlan.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PACKER FAMILY

are willing to match financial investments by continuing to provide a better product each season. "We as players have an obligation, now that we're getting more dollars, more teams, more sponsors and more resources, to continue to push the product and pace and quality on the ice," she said.

For Madison, nothing would please her more than to see the caliber of play, whether it be from incoming NCAA talent or players moving from the PWHPA, improve to a point where one day she finds herself on the outside looking in.

"If in a few years I'm a fourth-liner and can't make the roster anymore because better players are coming in, great, I've done my job," she said. "Come and take it. It's all about moving the game forward."

The Riveters captain, however, realizes there is still work to be done. Players in men's pro leagues continue to make millions. Although pay equity has yet to occur, Madison sees the top PHF players making $60,000 to $70,000. "It's good money," she said. "It's still not what the men are making, but

> “WE DO A LOT OF BALANCING AND SUPPORTING, AND IT FEELS LIKE WE'RE **JUST CONSTANTLY PASSING THE BATON BACK AND FORTH** – Anya Packer

the salary-cap increase has changed the way you look at players having to have a second job, what players' off-seasons look like. A little bit of money makes a big difference, and there's more opportunity now."

While Anya and Madison continue to push the game forward, they've also become visible representation for women and girls in sport, and also for the LGBTQ+ community. In a stirring public letter on outsports.com, Anya chronicled the struggles she had with family and feeling accepted. She knew the importance of telling her story for others to see, and wanted to shed the stigma and fear of coming out.

Madison, however, had a different experience. Accepted for who she was by everyone around her from Day 1, she never felt the need to make a public statement. That is, until her girlfriend at the time, Anya, came out publicly and Madison saw the outpouring of love, support and thanks. She saw for the first time that using her voice to support LGBTQ+ youth was not just important but necessary. "Publicly, I just assumed that people knew," Madison said. "I never felt the need to tell my story."

At one point, she was asked by the media about her relationship with Anya, openly questioning her sexuality. She remembers snapping back and quickly saying, "I'm a human being, and what does it matter?"

But it did matter, and Madison understands that now. Following Anya's article in Outsports, Madison publicly acknowledged her space in the LGBTQ+ community for the first time and embraced the important role of serving as representation for others.

"I never realized the importance of making my sexuality known and taking that stance on it because many people didn't have the experience I had," Madison said. "Many people struggle feeling like they have to hold it inside and that they can't be who they are. After that, I felt more comfortable talking about it and advocating for LGBTQ youth, and the whole community in general."

Today, hockey fans look to Madison and Anya, and as wives and advocates, they know the importance of continuing to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. "People come up all the time to us and say, 'Thank you so much. Because of you, I felt comfortable coming out to my parents,' " Madison said. "I don't think without hockey, or Anya, or that experience, I would have come out publicly or seen how important that is."

In their bathroom at home hangs a hand-drawn sketch of their wedding day and a letter from a fan. The letter thanks Madison and Anya for representing the LGBTQ+ community. It talks about a conversation the fan had with Madison, and how it resulted in the fan bringing their family to a Riveters game, sitting their parents down and telling them who they were and who they loved.

In this way, the Packers hold power not just in hockey but in society as well. They are agents of change working to push equity in sport forward alongside women's hockey. "Sometimes, it feels like a burden," Anya said. "We wonder if we're the right people leading this charge, but there is so much power in knowing you could be anything, whether that be a general manager or a player, and live your authentic self and not have that stop what you're doing."

Anya and Madison love hockey, but they also recognize that homophobia and racism exist in the game and that, as leaders, they can no longer sit quietly. During Black History Month in 2022, the Riveters donned a new version of their Rosie the Riveter jersey, this one featuring a Black Rosie. It was one small change, with major ramifications for equity.

"We try to do things like roll out initiatives to make hockey more inclusive, and we genuinely speak on our platforms to change hockey and make hockey more fair and equitable,

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PACKER FAMILY

and to remove racism," Anya said. "It's important to call it out when we see it to recognize we need to change the entire culture surrounding hockey."

While Madison captains the Riveters, Anya chose to step away from her GM role following the 2021-22 season. Anya, 30, plans to soon return to a role in the hockey world, but, currently, alongside Madison as wives and mothers, the duo are focused on building their own team. In 2020, they welcomed a son, Waylon, to the world, and this year, their daughter, Harlan, was born. As women in sport, this comes with more pressure to balance life and athletics, something, aside from travel, that counterparts in men's hockey often don't need to consider.

At home, Anya and Madison work as a team. When one is working, whether that's playing a game or running the operations of a franchise, the other is parenting. It's a large and often overlooked consideration in the world of professional sport. As with anything they've faced, however, the Packers find a way to make it work together.

Often, Madison's day begins by taking their son to daycare. She'll work out and prepare food while Anya works before returning to pick up Waylon. At home, the trio plays floor hockey together while baby Harlan watches. When it's a game day, Anya puts on her "supermom" cape and does it all. It's a busy world of parenting, work, training and hockey "We rock-paper-scissors for who gets in the pool when we get to swim class," Anya said. Sometimes, the only way to make it all work is to bring Waylon to the rink.

> “ HOCKEY HAS AFFORDED US SO MUCH. WITHOUT HOCKEY, I DON'T HAVE MY WIFE, MY CHILDREN, MY HOME. **MY LIFE LOOKS VERY DIFFERENT WITHOUT THE GAME** – Madison Packer

In the world of moving women's professional hockey forward, Anya and Madison are doing it all. More than that, they're doing it all together. "It's tough, I admire my wife," Anya said. "There are times I have to do it by myself when she's on a road trip. We do a lot of balancing and supporting, and it feels like we're just constantly passing the baton back and forth. And that partnership is where we excel."

Men in the world of sport often take these considerations for granted. It's a privilege to simply play and travel free of familial responsibility. When Anya decided to take the job as GM of the Riveters while Madison was still starring in the PHF, the duo had to find a way to make it work. As with anything in their lives, they realized the Packer family is stronger as a team. "We're very good at wholesale supporting each other," Anya said. "Sometimes we feel burnt out, or I'm at the end of my rope, and we just bring the other person back. Men have the luxury of having that home-base support. Because Madison isn't making $7 million a year, that's just not our life, so we have to make it all work at all times."

In 2022, Anya was named one of the 20 most likely candidates to become the first woman hired as a GM in the NHL. Since the list was released six members of the countdown – Emilie Castonguay, Cammi Granato, Meghan Hunter, Kate Madigan, Hayley Wickenheiser and Alexandra Mandrycky – have been hired as assistant GMs by NHL franchises. Anya will undoubtedly be a name many NHL teams will consider in the future, but her focus continues to be building the Riveters organization and women's hockey. Her career is just getting started, but it hasn't come without sacrifice.

"I think a lot of times we don't remember how much sacrifice comes with success," Anya said. "There are times that I miss swim class, or practice, or being with my wife. There are times there aren't enough hours in the day."

While Anya is just at the onset of her career, Madison, 31, knows hers is finite. She won't play forever. Continuing to play, however, has come with similar sacrifices, but Madison loves hockey, and she knows that the work done now will benefit future women in sport. "It's hard spending time away from my family," Madison said. "I've been comparing myself to the men, and I think, 'How do they do it?' It's so much time away. And then I look at Anya's doing the work she is, and I think, 'How long can I keep playing?' Anya always brings me back and says, 'You can play as long as you want to play.' Her answer is always, 'We will figure out a way for you to be supported and for it to work.' "

With Waylon, and now Harlan, watching their mom play on television and in person, Madison is getting closer to one key goal she wants for her

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future. “I always say I want to play long enough for my kids to remember it.”

Madison and Anya want to see it through. They want to be a part of securing a future for professional women’s hockey. They’ve been with the league since its infancy, but they also recognize that there were countless women who came before them, sacrificing and struggling to make sustainable pro hockey a reality, and they should not be forgotten.

“There are a lot of names that no one will ever remember, that people don’t know and faces people don’t recognize that have got the sport to this place,” Madison said. “I’ll look back at those players as the people that got us through the hard stuff and got us to where women’s hockey is meant to be.”

Despite their dreams for bigger things, the Packers also recognize what the game has already given them as people, and as a family. “Hockey has afforded us so much,” Madison said. “Without hockey, I don’t have my wife, my children, my home. My life looks very different without the game. I want younger generations to have that experience, a livelihood and career and something realistic they can dream about.”

> “I FEEL A GREAT SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT TODAY. **I’M PROUD OF WHO THE PACKER FAMILY IS IN THE WORLD OF HOCKEY** – Anya Packer

GROWING THE GAME

Women’s hockey players are being paid more and getting more TV exposure than ever before.

Still, there is more to come for women’s hockey. Looking back, Anya and Madison believe they’ll see a success story. They believe they’ll see a thriving professional women’s hockey league with an ever-growing fan base. The Packers hope that someday, they will look back at the sacrifices they made, the hours they committed and watch a new generation of players reap the rewards, and they’ll know they were a part of it. “I feel a great sense of accomplishment today,” Anya said. “I’m proud of who the Packer family is in the world of hockey.”

The PHF and women’s hockey is on an upward trajectory. One day, when they sit down as a family to watch women’s hockey on television, even if they don’t personally reap the benefits of a sustainable league or the luxury lifestyle afforded to highly paid pro athletes, Anya knows their sacrifices will have been worthwhile. “It’s what the women deserve,” she said. “I’m excited to be envious of being younger. I’m excited for that because I’ll always be a fan of women’s hockey. Hopefully someday when we are old, we can look back and be like, ‘Wow, it was worth it.’ ”

Madison and Anya Packer have been in this together since the beginning. And both on and off the ice, they’ll be together, loving the game and each other, until it’s time to pass the baton to another generation of powerful women in hockey.

MICHELLE JAY/PHF

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QUICK LEARNER
Ropp wasn't a big hockey fan before being named to her current position. But, luckily, she was a quick study.

ECHL

WEATHERING THE STORM

Ropp took over as Cyclones GM at the ECHL franchise's nadir, then quickly righted the ship. In doing so, she's charted a course for all aspiring female GMs to follow **BY TOM WORGO**

FOR NINE YEARS, KRISTIN Ropp had made her living in entertainment. She wasn't a singer or a musician. She worked as a theater manager and production manager at Clear Channel Entertainment, then as vice-president of Cincinnati's Heritage Bank Center, an arena that hosts famous bands, singers, the circus – and a minor-league hockey team.

Nederlander Entertainment, Ropp's employer, owned the arena, and the company bought the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones in 2001. But after two years, the franchise was struggling, to say the least. Then came a surprise: the company asked Ropp to be the team's GM.

There was just one problem. Ropp didn't particularly like hockey. Heck, she couldn't even skate. That's not to say she wasn't a sports fan. She loves football and roots passionately for her hometown Pittsburgh Steelers. Still, Ropp hesitated at first to take the job. "I knew it was a big step," she said. "But I didn't feel any other company would give a woman that chance."

Ropp eventually accepted the position after Nederlander agreed to make major arena renovations. But it wasn't only the building that needed a facelift. The Cyclones team Ropp inherited was floundering in 2003. Attendance and profits had hit rock bottom. They were so low, in fact, that Nederlander decided to suspend team operations for two seasons.

When the Cyclones resumed play in 2006-07, Ropp was poised to make the franchise a success. After becoming GM, she watched as many NHL games as she could, adopting the Penguins as her favorite NHL team. Ropp – through her job and through living with her hockey-obsessed husband, Christopher, and her hockey-playing oldest son, Henry – quickly got up to speed. With a growing hockey knowledge to go with already top-notch business skills and an imaginative flair for marketing, Ropp was ready to start reorganizing and rebranding the flailing franchise.

The most pressing task at the outset was pulling the team out of the red. Ropp had to run a tight budget. "I was cheap," she admitted. She even denied the coaching staff's request for second helmets for 17 years before finally relenting last season.

To get the franchise back in the black, Ropp watched every dollar. Among her numerous responsibilities on the hockey-operations side is approving the final travel budget. Whenever the team has a day off on the road, she must decide whether the Cyclones will make the round trip back home after a game or stay an extra night at a hotel. In the early years, she would choose the cheaper alternative. "We don't worry about it now," she said. "We're making more money."

Ropp applied the same tight-fisted approach to accommodations at home. One year, the Buffalo Sabres, Cincinnati's NHL parent club, sent the Cyclones a player who couldn't play due to injury. Ropp promptly told the Sabres "No," and sent him packing right back to Buffalo. "All he was doing was taking up an apartment," she said.

While watching each penny that went out, Ropp was also doing everything she could to bring in every dollar through the doors of Heritage Bank Center. Of all the things she has done for the organization,

PHOTOS BY CINCINNATI CYCLONES

WINDS OF CHANGE
Average attendance at Cyclones games has risen in 12 of the past 14 seasons under Ropp's watch.

Ropp's marketing ideas have been particularly successful. Some of her biggest hits were $10-ticket night, $1-beer night and $1-pizza night – the latter of which featured *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* appearances.

Between pinching pennies and bringing in the big bucks, Ropp managed to turn the team around, both on the ice and the spreadsheet.

When Ropp took over as GM in 2005, the Cyclones were bleeding money and averaging just 1,495 fans per game. Since then, average attendance has increased in 12 of the past 14 years (excluding 2020-21, when COVID-19 wiped out the season), reaching 7,080 in 2021-22. On the ice, Cincinnati has reached the final three times and won two Kelly Cups.

"She saw the bad days and led it to the good days," said ECHL commissioner Ryan Crelin. "She's been leading the charge. When they bought the team, they weren't drawing. Attendance was three figures. She has completely turned it around, building a sustainable fan base. Their biggest crowd was 16,000, which is amazing in minor-league hockey."

Ropp, 49, is nearly two decades into her job, but still isn't quite comfortable with the media attention she gets. Her interview with The Hockey News is one of only a handful she has done. She turned down all four Cincinnati TV stations when they wanted to profile her. "I had people that have contacted the organization and say they want to interview me about being a woman GM," Ropp said. "I say, 'Let's talk about the work and not just the fact I am a woman doing the work.' "

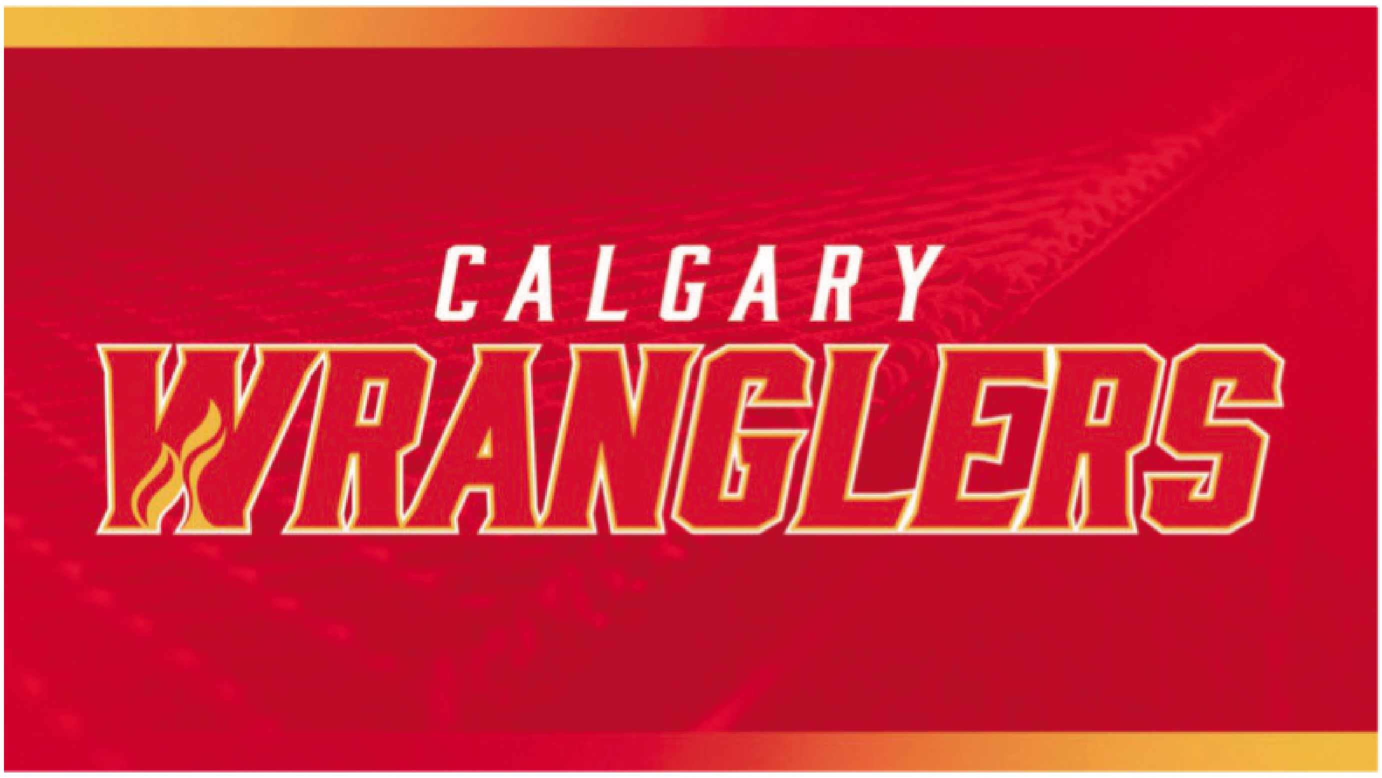
In fact, Ropp doesn't even have a bio on the team's website – just her name and title. "I am content flying under the radar," she said. "No one is there to see me. I think my claim to fame with it is rebranding and marketing the team. If I had an amazing history with hockey, I would be glad to tell it."

Still, Ropp realizes she's one of a kind. And she has her own thoughts on that. "They see me as a woman with my title, and they think that's pretty cool," Ropp said. "The short answer is yes, I like that. I feel blessed to have this opportunity."

> “THEY SEE ME AS A WOMAN WITH MY TITLE, AND THEY THINK THAT'S PRETTY COOL. **I FEEL BLESSED TO HAVE THIS OPPORTUNITY** – Kristin Ropp

Ropp's biggest goal nowadays is to get the team a practice facility that the community could also use. She's been working with the municipalities on the project for several years. The rink would benefit the Cincinnati Cyclones Foundation, which started four years ago to help grow hockey in the area. It was hampered by the pandemic but has supplied 50 kids with free equipment and another 50 with spots in the franchise's learn-to-skate programs.

Coach Jason Payne says Ropp, whether she intended to or not, has become a role model with all she's done.



AHL

HORSE POWER

The Flames relocated affiliate is branded with Calgary's ranch – and hockey – history

BY IAN KENNEDY

WHETHER IT WAS ON the trail or at a sprawling ranch, wranglers have been taming, handling and training horses and cattle across Western Canada for more than a century. On the ice, the Calgary Wranglers, Alberta's newest pro franchise, will look to corral fans this season as the Flames' rebranded and relocated AHL affiliate.

Moving from Stockton, Calif., where the team was known as the Heat, the Wranglers will play out of the Scotiabank Saddledome. The venue, also home to the NHL's Flames, has been used for the annual Calgary Stampede, a world-renowned rodeo event, since the building opened in 1983. The Wranglers name pays homage not only to the Stampede and Alberta's real-life cowboys but also to hockey history in the city.

From 1977 until 1987, the original Calgary Wranglers were a Western Canadian Junior League team. Calgary's first iteration of the Wranglers played at the Stampede Corral, the Saddledome's predecessor, and developed dozens of NHLers, including Mike Vernon, Kelly Kisio, Mark Tinordi and former Flames coach Jim Playfair.

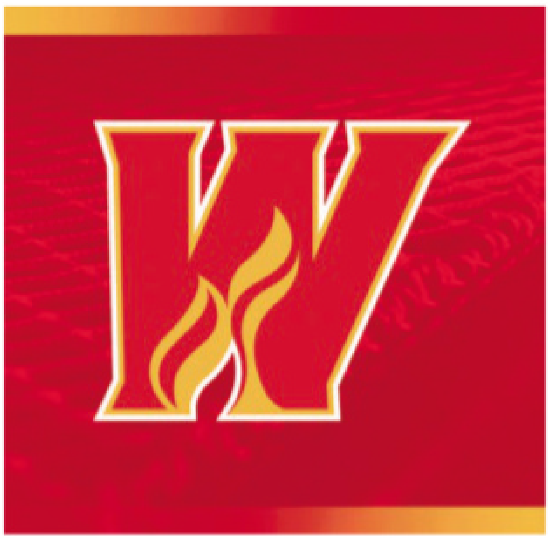
The team joins a stable of organizations operated by Calgary Sports and Entertainment, which also owns the CFL's Calgary Stampeders, NLL's Calgary Roughnecks and WHL's Calgary Hitmen. “We decided to go with a traditional, already used name, and we wanted to use the parent-club colors,” said CSEG director of marketing and promotions Ryan Popowich.

With that, the club narrowed its choices to a small pool of names. Had the name not been in use for the city's CFL franchise, perhaps the organization would have looked to pay homage to the 1946 Allan Cup-champion Calgary Stampeders, who later became an affiliate for the Chicago Black Hawks.

Calgary Sports and Entertainment, however, had experience with the Wranglers brand, which inevitably pushed the name to the forefront. In 2018, the WHL's Calgary Hitmen took part in a three-game ‘Corral Series’ played at the historic Stampede Corral before it was demolished. During each game, the team wore a different commemorative jersey representing former Calgary teams: the Calgary Centennials, Calgary Cowboys and Calgary Wranglers. When considering which nostalgic name to choose, as Popowich said, the 2018 event served as a focus group and litmus test for the market. “We had already experimented with these names with our WHL team,” Popowich said. “We did a rebrand with nostalgia teams, all former semi-pro and junior teams, where we brought back that branding and reclaimed the trademarks.

“Out of that series, the best pieces of feedback we got was the fan engagement and merchandise sales from running those brands out with the Hitmen. From that series, the top one was the Calgary Cowboys and next was the Wranglers. The two were very close, and one of those two was going to be our winner.”

While the group also considered keeping the Heat name used by Stockton, eventually the Wranglers won out. “We did come up with other concepts, but the Wranglers was always at the top. It became clear that the brand checked all the boxes and that it would work to connect to the parent club. This was also a great opportunity to go with the western cultural connection and identity of Alberta.”



COMMON BURN

The flaming ‘W’ creates a synergy with the parent Flames, with whom the Wranglers share a city and arena.

Many Heat players and the team's coach, Mitch Love, will join the Wranglers. According to Flames assistant GM and Wranglers GM Brad Pascall, he expects the move from Stockton to Calgary to generate excitement and intrigue. “It's an opportunity for Flames fans to get a glimpse and gain first-hand knowledge of the prospects in our system and to get excited about these players,” Pascall said.

Playing out of the same building and city will also be a benefit as “organizational synergy” develops between the clubs. “NHL teams moving their AHL team closer has been a trend,” Pascall said. “It provides ease. You can have shared resources, whether it's medical staff or strength training, but there's also more eyes on the players, more player development, more access to management watching you on a regular basis. It also provides face-to-face interaction between AHL staff and NHL staff during the season. This move will benefit our organization from top to bottom, both on and off the ice.” H

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CALGARY WRANGLERS

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TRISTAN JARRY IS GETTING THE JOB DONE IN PITTSBURGH

After a disastrous Stanley Cup playoff round last year, Tristan Jarry has turned the page to keep the Penguins in the thick of things.

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LEAFS' WOLL GRABS FIRST NHL SHUTOUT IN DOMINANT...

THN THREE STARS: MARKSTROM, GAUDREAU AND HEDMAN HIGHLIGHT THE WEEK

It's Sunday, so it's time for THN's Three Stars of the Week. Adam Proteau the NHLers who stood out from the rest, in a positive way, over the past seven days.

BY ADAM PROTEAU · NOV 21, 2021

TOP 5 THINGS THAT YOU'LL NEVER SEE RETURN IN THE NHL

The game of hockey has evolved in a big way over time, and there are some things we'll never see again. Here' a look at five aspects of the sport we'll never see return in the NHL.

BY AVRY LEWIS-MCDOUGALL · NOV 21, 2021

HOME AT LAST: ISLANDERS PLAY OPENER AT NEW...

Last night was a long time coming for the Islanders and their fans. Now, the new arena is here and the years of uncertainty over the team's future are over.

BY ASSOCIATED PRESS · NOV 21, 2021

11:16

The Hockey News

TRISTAN JARRY IS GETTING THE JOB DONE IN PITTSBURGH

After a disastrous Stanley Cup playoff round last year, Tristan Jarry has turned the page to keep the Penguins in the thick of things.

BY STEVEN ELLIS · 23 HOURS AGO

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ON SECOND THOUGHT
Jenkins, middle, pitched his way into baseball's hallowed Hall, but it was actually hockey that was his first love.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GERRY BINGA

SLIDING DOORS

If not for an evening out with his father in 1957, Fergie Jenkins may have taken the NHL by storm instead **BY IAN KENNEDY**

IN TODAY’S HOCKEY WORLD, an athletic 6-foot-5 D-man is an asset all teams would love. In Chatham, Ont., in the 1950s, a young hockey player fit that description. He dreamed of making his local junior club, the Chatham Maroons, and someday following in the footsteps of the first Black NHLer, Willie O’Ree, and competing at the highest level.

But as fate would have it, Fergie Jenkins did not follow his hockey dreams. Instead, Jenkins became one of the greatest Canadian baseball players ever and the first Canadian inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. He played 19 MLB seasons, most notably with the Chicago Cubs and Texas Rangers.

Baseball was always a part of Jenkins’ life, with his father playing for the famed all-Black Chatham Coloured All-Stars. But Ferguson Jenkins Sr. actually put his son into hockey before organized baseball. “As a kid growing up, my dad got me into sports, and he got me into hockey first,” Jenkins said.

Around Jenkins’ fifth birthday, his father gave him his first pair of skates. “I played hockey more than any other sport when I was a kid,” said Jenkins in his 2009 autobiography, *Fergie: My Life From The Cubs To Cooperstown*. “I’d say it was three or four nights a week at one point.”

In 1957, Fergie and his father travelled to an exhibition game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Boston Bruins in London, Ont. On the ice was Willie O’Ree, who, the following January, became the first Black player to appear in an NHL game. Seeing O’Ree play that day made Jenkins, then 14, believe hockey was his path. “After that game, I wanted to play in the NHL,” he said. “I wanted to be like Willie O’Ree.”

But another outing with his dad that year set Jenkins on a path toward baseball. This time, the game was between the Detroit Tigers and Chicago White Sox. Playing for Chicago was a player named Larry Doby, MLB’s second Black player and the first in the American League. Doby hit a pair of home runs and received hearty cheers from the Detroit faithful despite being on the visiting team.

Seeing a legendary Black baseball player and hearing the subsequent buzz of the crowd was pivotal for Jenkins. Right there, Jenkins turned to his father and said, “You know, Dad, I think I want to play baseball.”

It took good coaching and a few breaks for Jenkins, always a raw physical talent, to catch major-league eyes. That break came when one of his schoolteachers in Chatham called a friend who was an area scout for the Philadelphia Phillies.

But by the time the scout came to see Jenkins, the baseball diamonds were covered in snow, and Jenkins was doing his best to emulate his childhood hero, Montreal defenseman Doug Harvey (though he grew up closer to Toronto and Detroit, Jenkins was a Canadiens fan). “The scout didn’t come down until the winter, when I was busy playing hockey,” Jenkins said. “At that time, I was a Doug Harvey defenseman wannabe. There weren’t too many 6-foot-5 defensemen in the NHL. The scout came up to me and said, ‘I hear that you’re a pitcher.’ I said, ‘Well, not really, but I’m learning.’ ”

That winter, Jenkins worked out for and trained with the scout in a local high-school gym, and the rest is history.

After signing a pro contract at 18, Jenkins began playing in Florida in 1962. Upon arriving, he received a lecture on where he could go and where he could eat. While segregation was ending in Canada, it was just beginning for Jenkins. Stepping off the bus during one of his team’s first road games in Florida, Jenkins was hungry. He walked into a restaurant with his teammates and approached the waitress to order. “We can’t serve you,” said the woman behind the counter, and she turned away to serve his white teammates. Dejected, Jenkins returned to the bus to find his other Black teammates had never even left their seats. They already knew what awaited them outside, but Jenkins, who had never travelled the American South at the time, was in for an education in racism. His Black teammates told him that if he was hungry, he needed to give a white teammate his money so they could bring him back some food.

When Jenkins finally made the bigs, things changed, and it didn’t take him long to establish his dominance. A Cy Young winner and three-time all-star, Jenkins continued to play hockey in Canada during the off-seasons. “I always thought I was going to be a decent hockey player, but it didn’t work out that way, baseball took over,” he said during a *Hometown Hockey* interview with Ron MacLean and Tara Slone in 2018.

Had scouts seen a 6-foot-5 multi-sport star like Jenkins on the ice today, the story may have changed. What if he’d stuck with hockey? It’s a question Jenkins has asked often, including in his autobiography: “I think I made the right decision choosing baseball. Who knows what would have happened in my life if I had become a rare Black hockey player?”

THREE DAYS IN THE SNOW

A storm marooned the Chinese Aces in smalltown Ontario, but there, they found a familiar sense of welcoming **BY IAN KENNEDY**

CHINESE ACES
COACH
COACH

PHOTO BY MONTY TASCHEREAU

WHILE THE CHINESE ACES skated, the snow started falling. The team was in Morrisburg, Ont., on the shores of the St. Lawrence River.

The Aces were playing one of their many winter exhibition games, raising money for war relief efforts. It was 1943, and the Second World War was ongoing. “We packed all of the arenas, everywhere we went,” said Bill Joe, a star player for the Aces, who later became a prominent volunteer and aide for Chinese immigrants in Ottawa. “And whatever they charged for that, all that money went to the Chinese War Relief Fund.”

That night in mid-March, the Aces, a team of Chinese Canadians from the Ottawa area, beat Morrisburg 7-2. After the game, what would usually be just over an hour’s drive home turned into something else entirely.

Established in 1941, the team came together while Asian Canadians faced a barrage of racist opposition. That included the Chinese Exclusion Act – a law banning Chinese people from entering Canada – and the forced internment of Japanese Canadians.

After the game, the Aces and 10 supporters piled into three vehicles and headed for Ottawa. But the weather had other ideas. The vehicles followed a snowplow until the plow suddenly broke down. The team tried to turn back, but as the snow continued, their cars became stuck. The group huddled in the vehicles through the night, but as morning approached, two players, brothers Alfred and Hector Seto, set out for help. Near the town of Winchester, the brothers happened across a farmhouse owned by a man named Harvey Smith. Smith’s wife greeted the boys and welcomed them inside. Upon hearing their story, she invited the entire group to stay.

In Denise Chong’s retelling of the event for the Ottawa Chinese Community Service Centre, she said, “The Smiths’ unexpected guests took up every available sleeping space; the three smallest players slept on the kitchen table.”

While there, the men cooked rice, and the guests and their hosts played Chinese checkers and cards. After three days, the plows started moving, freed the players’ cars, and the Aces returned to Ottawa.

The willingness to house nearly 20 strangers may seem odd by today’s standards, but the Aces and their families were accustomed to helping newcomers in Ottawa’s Chinese Canadian community. As Joe, who co-founded the Ottawa Chinese Community Service Centre, stated in a 2009 interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*, “Anybody who came to the city and didn’t have a place for dinner, they came to our house. No place to sleep? OK, we’ll put a bunk there for you.”

From then on, the Aces travelled in the Yick Lung Groceries Co. truck Sue Wong owned. Sue’s son Leslie was the Aces’ captain, and when Leslie wasn’t riding to games in the truck, he’d deliver groceries to local Chinese Canadian families in it.

The Aces competed in the Ottawa area from 1941 until 1946, when the majority of players from their roster moved on to university.

During this era, the Aces weren’t the only all-Chinese Canadian hockey team in the country, and they definitely weren’t the first. That honor likely goes to teams from Calgary that can be traced back as early as 1899. In 1945, Ottawa’s Aces faced another all-Chinese Canadian team formed in the 1930s, known as the Montreal Atlas. According to Joe, the unique nature of seeing two teams composed solely of Chinese Canadians was a huge draw for fans at the time. “We trailblazed in the fact that we were a novelty, a novelty of an all-Chinese team. Now we weren’t the first, they had one in Montreal, Montreal Atlas, we went and beat them in the Montreal Forum one Sunday afternoon in front of 4,000 people.”

The Aces played many teams in their day, but one stood above the rest. “The Aylmer Saints were our reference as a team of excellence,” Hector Seto said.

The Saints roster was composed heavily of members of the Boucher family, relatives of Hall of Famer ‘Buck’ Boucher and his brothers, Billy, Frank and Bobby – each of them NHLers.

After losing to the team many times over the years, the Aces ended their run in 1945, beating Aylmer 3-2, and again in 1946, this time by a 5-4 score.

While no Ace ever went pro, another Chinese Canadian, Larry Kwong, became the first Asian NHLer, playing a single shift for the New York Rangers in 1946, the same year the Aces played their final games.

Since then, a handful of players with Chinese ancestry have cracked the pros, including recent NHLers Spencer Foo, Josh Ho-Sang and Brandon Yip, and Canucks prospect Jett Woo.

For Chinese Canadians, many barriers still exist, but the game has come a long way since 1943, when the Aces got stuck in the snow. H

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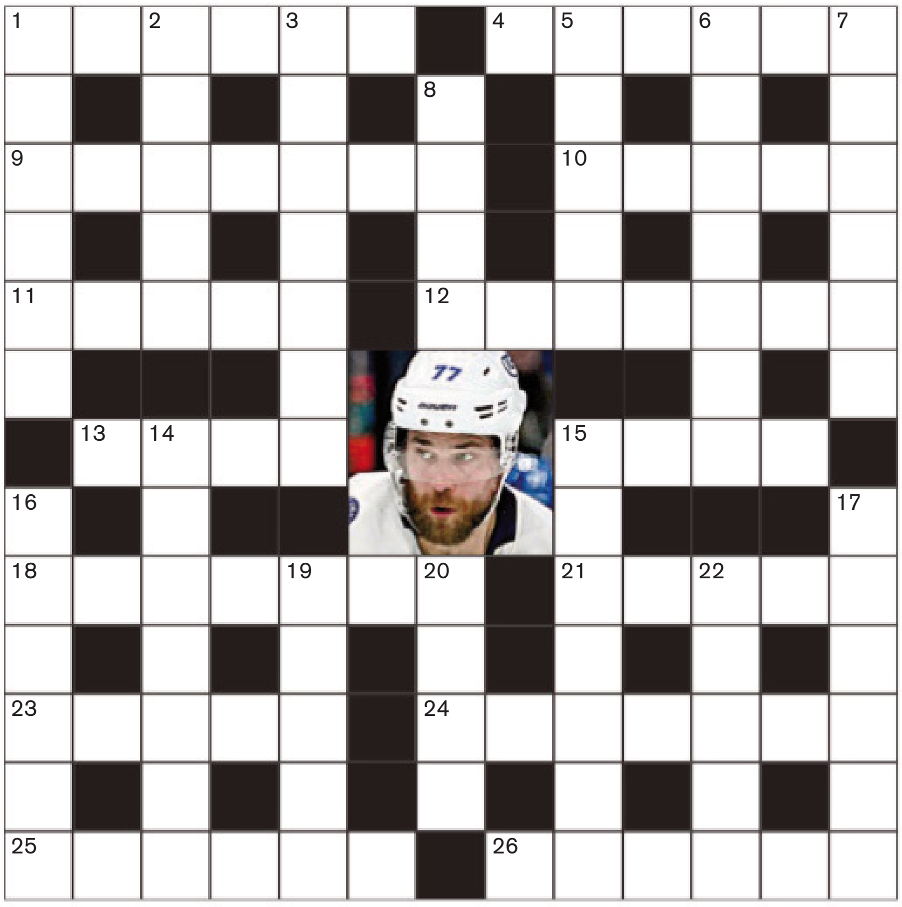
BY LARRY HUMBER



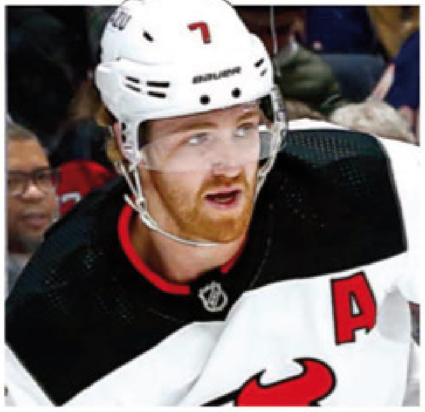
ACROSS

1 Hardest-shot winner at 2022 ASG, pictured
4 Chris ___ is remembered for his nine goals during the 1989 playoffs
9 'Captain America,' shootout king (full name)
10 The only skater from a losing team to be selected Conn Smythe Trophy winner
11 Come about
12 Location of the 'Carlton Street Cashbox'
13 Don Cherry's dog (it was white, though)
15 Gordie Howe's Hall of Famer son
18 He coached the Devils to their first Cup
21 Cut back on training, ___ off
23 Toss out
24 Justin ___ won two Cups on Pens' blueline
25 NBA team that shares the Wells Fargo Center with 16 Down (nickname)
26 Homeland of 1 Across

DOWN

1 Calgary's WHL team
2 Prepares to fight, ___ the gloves
3 'Gretz' was named Canada's ___ of the year a record four times
5 Connor McDavid is one, as was Mark Messier
6 'Frosty' was Boston's in Orr's day
7 Harvard is an Ivy League ___, as is Yale
8 ___ wing lock
14 'Super Mario' is now part owner in Pittsburgh
15 One of the Tkachuks
16 Wells Fargo Center's other occupants
17 The ___ Four crowns the NCAA champ
19 A typical ___-conference game would pit the Sens against the Avs
20 The Devils used to play in ___ Rutherford
22 Ran up the score, ___ it on

Hockey TRIVIA



> BEGINNER:
The player pictured above was the prize of 2021's UFA class, signing a seven-year deal with the New Jersey Devils at a princely sum of $9 million per season.

> INTERMEDIATE:
This 2011 off-season signing will be paid until 2026-27, thanks to a buyout lasting 14 years, tied for the second-longest in NHL history (behind a fellow goalie).

> EXPERT:
The Huberdeau-Tkachuk deal swapped two players coming off 100-point years. That's happened only once before. Name those two 100-point players.

Word SEARCH

Too soon? Probably. But here are 10 UFAs who could switch uniforms next summer.

2023 Free Agents

R	O	L	O	T	D	U	M	B	A	O	G	R	K
G	A	T	A	R	A	S	E	N	K	O	C	N	K
T	I	A	B	P	R	E	K	Y	M	C	O	M	S
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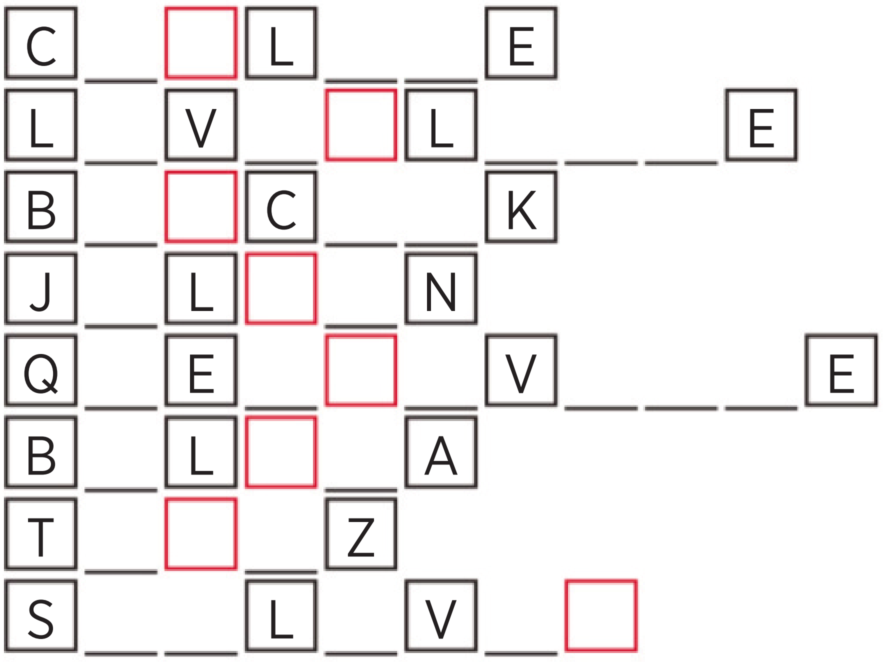
A	A	N	L	C	S	R	R	S	P	B	N	C	I
E	S	V	I	I	N	K	K	K	R	P	Y	K	B
C	T	N	N	O	R	N	E	B	N	A	L	I	E
R	R	B	G	R	L	K	A	A	P	V	L	N	Y
P	N	T	B	E	T	A	D	N	C	E	I	N	C
I	A	A	E	T	A	N	V	A	M	L	E	O	P
A	K	K	R	T	A	E	Y	O	R	S	R	N	P
A	N	N	G	Y	T	K	K	T	A	K	O	A	O
E	K	R	L	D	C	L	U	I	N	I	N	C	Y
N	N	E	O	L	L	N	L	A	G	N	Y	A	Y

MACKINNON
KANE
PASTRNAK
O'REILLY
LARKIN
KLINGBERG
TARASENKO
PAVELSKI
PACIORETTY
DUMBA

PUCK PUZZLE

Can your hockey brain bring its A-game? The challenge is on!

Craig Berube stunned in 2019, winning the Stanley Cup as an interim coach. Fill in the blanks to identify eight other recent Cup-winning coaches. The name of the previous interim coach to hoist the Cup will appear in the red boxes.



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B _ L ☐ _ A
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S _ _ L _ V _ ☐

TRIVIA: TOM HORAK-USA TODAY SPORTS; HEDMAN: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

CROSSWORD SOLUTION: **ACROSS** 1. HEDMAN , 4. KONTOS, 9. TJ OSHIE, 10. LEACH, 11. ENSUE, 12. TORONTO, 13. BLUE, 15. MARK, 18. LEMAIRE, 21. TAPER, 23. EJECT, 24. SCHULTZ, 25. SIXERS, 26. SWEDEN
DOWN 1. HITMEN, 2. DROPS, 3. ATHLETE, 5. OILER, 6. TRAINER, 7. SCHOOL, 8. LEFT, 14. LEMIEUX, 15. MATTHEW, 16. FLYERS, 17. FROZEN, 19. INTER, 20. EAST, 22. PILED **TRIVIA ANSWERS:** DOUGIE HAMILTON, ILYA BRYZGALOV, WAYNE GRETZKY AND JIMMY CARSON
WORD SEARCH: PLAY ONLINE AT HTTPS://THEWORDSEARCH.COM/PUZZLE/4009933 **PUCK PUZZLE SOLUTION:** CARLYLE, LAVIOLETTE, BABCOCK, JULIEN, QUENNEVILLE, BYLSMA, TROTZ, SULLIVAN (FINAL ANSWER: ROBINSON)

[THE LAST WORD]
WITH RYAN KENNEDY | @THNRYANKENNEDY

NHL

CHANGING OF THE REARGUARDS

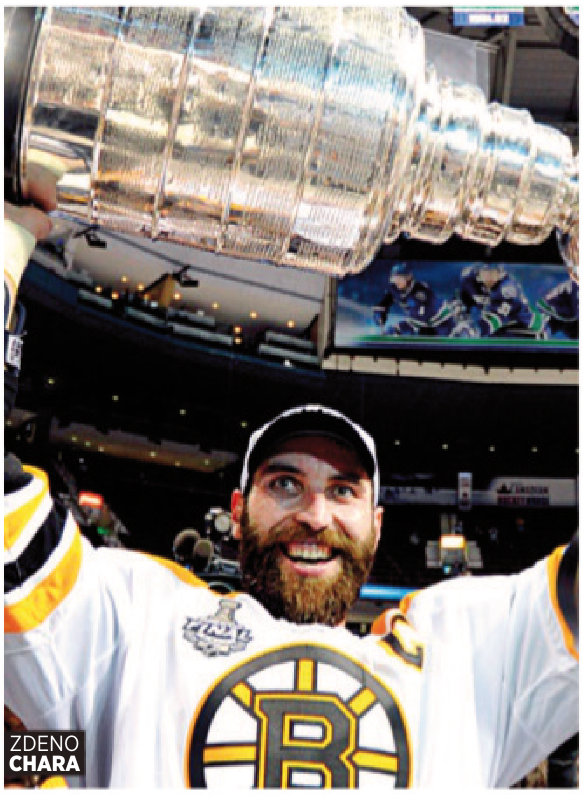
A trio of the past decade's best blueliners called it a career in mid-September. And in their wake, each leaves a lasting legacy

P.K.
SUBBAN

THEY SAY THINGS HAPPEN in threes, and boy, was that true on Sept. 20, as a trio of defensemen announced their retirements in quick succession. Players leave the game all the time, but the sheer name recognition made that day so meaningful – with Zdeno Chara, P.K. Subban and Keith Yandle all hanging up the skates.

In Chara, you have a surefire first-ballot Hall of Famer – a Stanley Cup-winning captain with the Boston Bruins and a player who, without hyperbole, we have never seen the likes of before and may not ever again.

Coming in at 6-foot-9 and 250 pounds, Chara was a physically dominant two-way defenseman who cut off half the defensive zone with his reach and played big minutes. And heaven help the man who challenged him to a fight, because Chara had *X-Men* level strength – who could forget the time he literally swung 225-pound Bryan McCabe around the ice when Chara was a member of the Ottawa Senators?



ZDENO
CHARA

It's amazing to think Chara came to North America as a lanky teen who went through the fire with WHL Prince George before starting his pro career with the fantastically named Kentucky Thoroughblades of the AHL. His first NHL experience came with the New York Islanders (who drafted him in the third round in 1996), but it was in Ottawa where Chara became a force to be reckoned with. In Boston, he took things to another level, winning a Norris Trophy in 2009 and clinching his only Cup in 2011.

Chara's commitment to fitness allowed him to play well into his 40s, and while he wasn't as successful after leaving Boston for Washington and a final year with the Isles, his longevity (24 seasons) is amazing, especially for someone so big and physical.

On top of his on-ice excellence, Chara was an incredible leader and part of a leadership group who established a winning culture in Boston, one that continues today thanks to former teammates such as Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and Charlie McAvoy.

While Subban's flame didn't burn as long as Chara's, it burned brighter, and he too will garner Hall of Fame interest. One of the most dynamic defensemen of his day, Subban was a star both on and off the ice, and his willingness to put himself out there and use his personality was years ahead of its time. Only now are we seeing more young players, such as Trevor Zegras and Brady Tkachuk, do the same.

Whether it was a big hit or a big goal, Subban was a standout for the Montreal Canadiens for years, winning a Norris Trophy with the Habs in 2013. The trade that moved him to Nashville for Shea Weber sent shockwaves throughout the hockey world in 2016, and the debate over which team won the deal rages on to this day.

Off the ice, Subban made the most of his status by donating both his time and large sums of money to charity, especially when it came to sick kids. In 2015, he donated $10 million to the Montreal Children's Hospital. Even forgetting about what he did in hockey, that's an impressive legacy.

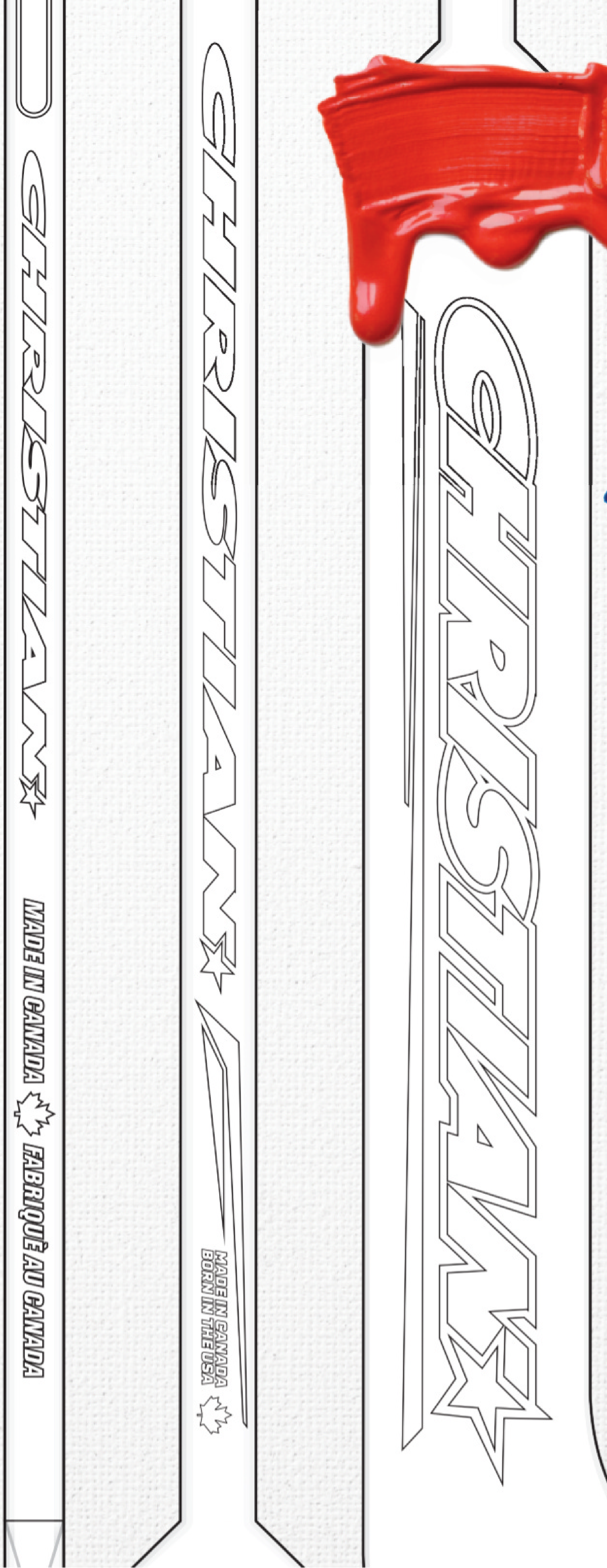
After a solid stint in Nashville (including a trip to the Cup final in 2017), Subban moved on to New Jersey, but he never quite got in gear with the Devils. It always felt like the writing was on the wall this summer with him, and I even joked that the next contract he signed would be with ESPN. Subban can do whatever he wants with the next phase in his life, but it feels like having him on TV is a no-brainer, given his outgoing personality and experience in the game.

KEITH
YANDLE

Yandle may not have a Norris like his two retiring peers, but he leaves the game with something no other player has: the NHL ironman record. Though he might have a short reign with Phil Kessel nipping at his heels, Yandle took over for Doug Jarvis last season by playing in 989 consecutive games. A clever offensive defenseman known for faking out forecheckers behind the net, Yandle made his name with the Phoenix/Arizona Coyotes before stops with the New York Rangers, Florida Panthers and Philadelphia Flyers. To be healthy enough to play the game at such a high level that long is truly amazing.

A new wave of blueline stars has already taken over the NHL, led by Cale Makar, Victor Hedman and Roman Josi. But the three players who all retired on the same day will not be forgotten anytime soon. H

SUBBAN: GARY A. VASQUEZ-USA TODAY SPORTS; CHARA: ANNE-MARIE SORVIN-USA TODAY SPORTS; YANDLE: BRUCE FEDYCK-USA TODAY SPORTS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